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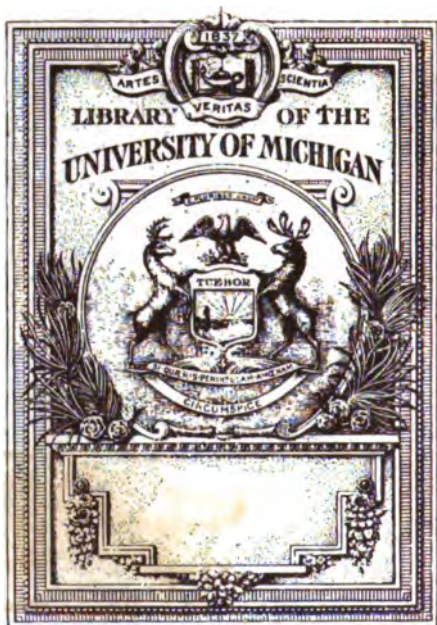
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KINGS-AT-ARMS

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

**I WILL MAINTAIN
DEFENDER OF THE FAITH
GOD AND THE KING
THE QUEST OF GLORY
THE GOVERNOR OF ENGLAND
PRINCE AND HERETIC
THE CARNIVAL OF FLORENCE
"WILLIAM, BY THE GRACE OF GOD"—
THE THIRD ESTATE
GOD'S PLAYTHINGS
SHADOWS OF YESTERDAY**

E. P. DUTTON & COMPANY

KINGS-AT-ARMS

BY
MARJORIE BOWEN



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KINGS-AT-ARMS

PART I

THE CONQUEROR

"Presque toutes ses actions, jusqu'à celles de sa vie privée et amie, ont été bien loin au delà du vraisemblable. C'est peut-être le seul de tous les hommes, et jusqu'ici le seul de tous les rois, qui ait reçu sans faiblesse; il a porté toutes les vertus à au excès où elles sont aussi dangereuses que les vices opposés."—VOLTAIRE.

BOOK I

KARL XII

"A name at which the world grew pale."—S. JOHNSON.

CHAPTER. I

ALADY, haughty and fierce in her natural character, but schooled to at least the outward show of a cold patience by long years of training in submission to the wills of men, sat in a little private dining-room of her palace at Stockholm and frowned with an air of discontent and pride at her companion, a gentleman, elderly but much younger than herself, who stood by the fireplace and looked on the ground; he also had an air by no means well satisfied, but though he was only a minister and she was a Queen he had never been as much in the background as she, nor so forced to subdue an imperious spirit, for she was

a woman, and women had never counted for much in Sweden.

They did not like each other, Count Piper, the late King's minister, and Eleanora Edwiga, the late King's mother; she knew that she owed to him her forced retirement from the brief-prized power that she had held as Regent, and he thought her very presence in the palace was vexatious and that her place was in retirement with her prayer-book and her embroidery, but for the moment they were in the same position and might be useful to each other, therefore, tacitly ignoring mutual dislike, they became allies.

"I do not know," said the Queen, "why we talk about these things, for, of course, the King will do as he wishes."

She spoke with a certain chill triumph, and Count Piper knew that her words meant, "If I cannot rule my grandson, neither can you"; he also knew that she spoke from pure malice, and that she found every use in discussing the affairs that composed her life.

"Naturally, Madame," he answered quietly, "the King will do as he likes. It is for us to find out what he does like."

The old woman gave him a long and rather bitter look.

"Do you not know?" she asked.

"No, Madame," smiled Count Piper.

"Well, I do," replied the Queen sharply. "He likes just what any boy of eighteen likes," she glanced at the table with covers for three, elegant but not splendid. "And he is late for dinner," she added, and the love of old age for trifles showed in her acid tone.

Count Piper seemed faintly amused.

"It would be strange if His Majesty should be ordinary—considering his lineage," he replied. "And he was very carefully trained."

The Queen was hit through her pride in her husband and her son.

"Karl's breed will show later," she said stiffly, "for the moment he is—as I said—eighteen."

"A good age," remarked Count Piper, a little sadly. "I wish I was—eighteen——"

"Or King of Sweden at any age," snapped the Queen. "You always were ambitious, Count."

"Only to serve," he answered meekly.

The Queen glanced from the table to the door; expectancy and vexation showed in her face; she was tall and still upright, spare and haggard, a Dane, and of a pure Northern type; she had been handsome in a cold, hard fashion, and was now rather terrible in her gaunt colorlessness, her sunk blue eyes, her pinched nose, her lipless mouth; all the long structure of her face showed and the flesh seemed polished on the temples, the cheek bones, and chin.

No look of wisdom nor compassion nor resignation softened this countenance; her glance was still that of a fighter who has grown bitter in the struggle.

Her dress, of gold and purple brocade, was rich and in tolerable imitation of the fashion of Versailles; a lace headdress crowned her white curls and she wore some costly rubies on her knotted fingers.

The room of this Northern Princess, which was situate in that portion of the Royal Palace of Stockholm that had been saved from the great fire of two years ago, and that was filled with the distant sound of the workmen rebuilding the edifice in a style in keeping with the increased grandeur of Sweden, was simple, yet in a way splendid; the dark paneled walls and ceiling gave the apartment a somber air, as did the inlaid and heavy furniture; it was a cold day in early spring and the sky was gray; from where the Queen sat she could see this grayness reflected in the water from which the palace rose, and the bridges, houses, and waterways beyond all colorless in the cold light of the sad midday.

Count Piper kept his glance on the dark rug at his feet; he was tingling with thoughts of great issues and large events; it was the eve of big affairs for his prosperous and successful country which was menaced by

many and powerful enemies eager to seize the chance to despoil a youthful King; Count Piper felt himself equal to dealing with these concerns—but he was only a councilor of state, and must wait the pleasure of that same youthful King who even now was keeping him waiting for his dinner.

A slight impatience with fate darkened his thin clever face; it seemed so cruel a blow for Sweden that the late King, stern, wise, just, should die in his prime leaving his heritage in the hands of a boy and an old woman.

The Queen suddenly broke the prolonged pause.

"I seldom or never hear the truth, of course," she said abruptly. "But you, Count, must have means of knowing many things. Tell me," and her tone betrayed an anxiety she would never have owned to, "what do the people say of Karl?"

Count Piper knew perfectly well what was the general opinion of the young King—that he was considered idle, haughty, obstinate, and autocratic—the public was not likely to take any other view of one wholly devoted to amusements, and who gave no sign of being of the breed of his heroic father and grandfather beyond the imperious pride with which, on several occasions, he had asserted his position.

But Count Piper attached little importance to this verdict of the world and did not choose to repeat it to the ears of the Queen Dowager.

"His Majesty," he replied, "has already given tokens of a spirit such as the Swedes love, and they await his manhood with many hopes."

"He has spirit enough for ordinary impudence," remarked the old woman drily; she was thinking how, as a boy of fifteen, he had removed her from the regency and assumed the government himself, and how, at his coronation, he had snatched the crown from the archbishop's hands and placed it on his brow himself. "Has he spirit enough to go to war, and wit enough to be successful if he does?"

The statesman looked grave.

"I count upon his ancestors," he replied.

The Queen would have returned a sharp answer, but the door opened noisily and the subject of their talk entered the room with an unsteady step and dropped into the chair with arms at the head of the table.

He wore a very rich hunting suit of violet velvet laced with silver; this was torn and muddy, his lawn shirt and his wrist ruffles were bloody, as were his hands and the sheaths of the long knives he wore thrust into his belt.

"Am I late?" he asked. "I had a mind not to come back at all. It was pleasant in the woods."

The Queen rose with a glance of disgust for his attire and his condition; he had never yet appeared before her so soiled from the chase. And he was obviously intoxicated. She hesitated for a second, then rang the silver bell by her side and took her seat opposite to her grandson, at the end of the table.

Count Piper came quietly to his place between the King and Queen.

"There is much business for you to-day, sir," he said.

"Business?" said Karl; he laughed, dragged at his napkin and sent over a glass.

The lackeys entered with the dinner and there was silence in the somber little room; both the Queen and Count Piper were looking covertly at the young King.

His appearance, even in his present dishevelment and intoxication, was most remarkable; he did not need his kingship to make him conspicuous—in any company, on any occasion, he would have been noticed.

He was then in his eighteenth year, fully and perfectly developed, tall and vigorous above the common even in a nation of tall and vigorous men, graceful with the grace of health and strength, and easy with the ease of one born to occupy always the place of command and power.

His countenance expressed nothing but pride, which was, however, tempered by a certain calm tolerance; his brow was low and broad, the nose short, blunt, and clearly cut, the mouth large, curved, and mobile, the chin rounded, the face wide, the eyes very handsome, of a pure blue free from any admixture of gray and well-set under heavy arching brows; these eyes were full of a serenity that was almost a blankness, a look curious and not altogether either amiable or attractive; there was something about the young man's whole appearance that was strange, something difficult, perhaps impossible, to describe.

Count Piper, who had observed him long and closely, had once said to himself, "Karl is like an animal—or a god," which he felt to be a foolish comparison, yet knew that it expressed that peculiar impression made by the King—an impression that whatever he was he was not ordinary humanity—scarcely humanity at all, but something beyond, or, at least outside, manhood.

Yet now he was ordinary enough in his clothes torn by the violence of the chase and stained by the blood of the animals whom he had slain, his strength and his wits alike beyond his control through the wine he had drunk.

His hair, which was light brown and very thick, hung in a quantity of loosely entwined curls, through those on his shoulders was tied a long black ribbon; the front locks hung down either side his cheeks and across his forehead into his strange eyes.

His grandmother looked at him with less curiosity and less friendliness than did Count Piper.

"It is as well that I did not bid your sisters dine with us to-day," she said, as she saw the King fill his glass with a strong shaking hand.

He drank his wine and then stared at her; in silence he set the beaker down, and then laughed in a way that curled his mouth unpleasantly.

It was remarkable how his personality even now,

when he was not master of himself, seemed to fill the room, making the other two people and the whole surrounding but a background to his fierce young figure.

Dish after dish was removed; only the Queen ate, as if she disdained to be disturbed.

"Your Majesty enjoyed the chase?" asked Count Piper suddenly; he wiped his mouth with his napkin, using a precise movement.

"I killed three bears," said Karl; he laughed again, showing his strong, perfect teeth.

"You spend your time well," said the old Queen bitterly. "And now you will sleep all the afternoon, and drink all the evening. And to-morrow the chase again."

"And three more bears," smiled the King.

His grandmother looked at him with a coldness that approached aversion.

"Your father's death was a great misfortune," she said—"for Sweden."

"Sweden does very well," returned Karl indifferently.

"That," put in Count Piper gently, "is a question that your Majesty must better acquaint yourself with."

Karl lifted his head which had sunk forward on his broad chest; his face was flushed and his eyes blood-shot; he spoke thickly.

"No councils of state—no councils of state, and dull speeches and silly disputes," he said.

"And no interviews with your wretched sister and her ruined husband, who are here to crave your succor," added the Queen sarcastically.

"Does my sister complain of me?" muttered Karl haughtily.

"The Duchess of Holstein is in terrible straits," remarked Count Piper gravely.

"Well," asked Karl, "are not you, Count, capable of helping my brother-in-law to keep his little duchy?"

The minister was quick to seize his moment. "It is only your Majesty can do that," he said, and leant towards the King.

"Only I," repeated Karl stupidly. "And why is that?"

"Who else in Europe," said Count Piper, "can face at once the King of Denmark, the King of Poland, and the Czar of Muscovy?—who but the son of Karl XI, the grandson of Karl X?"

At this open appeal to pride and vanity the Queen pushed back her chair with a movement of contempt; the young man's eyes gleamed for a second; he put his hand to his forehead in a confused manner, pushing back the tangled light curls.

"Are you frightened by three such names, like the children with talk of ogres?" sneered the Queen. "Indeed, you look capable, sire, of facing the greatest man in the world!"

"And who is that?" asked Karl, still amazed and stupid.

"Why, that is the Czar of Muscovy," replied the old woman, composed and vicious and heedless of Count Piper's look of warning, "the man we shall all be begging for pity soon—that will be a pleasant day for me—a woman who has had such a husband and such a son."

Karl stared at her.

"I am not afraid of the Czar of Muscovy," he replied.

The Queen laughed, the thin and heartless laugh of old age.

"I am sure your Majesty is afraid of nothing," said Count Piper quickly, "but you must be a little fearful for Sweden."

Karl gave a sullen glance at the speaker; he was still drinking and could hardly hold himself upright in his chair; a shadow passed over the face of the minister; he would not look at the Queen for he knew her expression would be one of sour triumph; his

tired eyes narrowed and he kept them fixed on the King.

Karl leant forward with a lurching movement and stared into his glass in which still hung, as he tipped it, a drop of brilliant wine.

"The Czar," he muttered, "the Czar——"

Then he suddenly broke into fury, dashed down the glass, and staggered to his feet.

"God help you, Madame," he shouted at the Queen, "but do you think that I am no match for the Czar of Muscovy?"

He stood as if he threatened her, flushed and with eyes gleaming as only bright blue eyes can.

The Queen turned a wax-yellow color as her cold blood receded from her face.

"I think you are no company for a lady's table," she said bitterly.

Karl turned round passionately.

"Piper," he cried, "Piper—did I not say I would have no more of old women?"

He tried to leave the table, but being unsteady on his feet and fastened in his place by a heavy chair could not at once do so; Count Piper—for some minutes on his feet—sprang forward to free him, but the King, with fierce impatience, pushed back the chair and stumbled towards the door.

One of his spurs had entangled in the lace border of the cloth, his impetuous movement violently dragged at this, and in an instant all that was on the table, plate, fruit, wine, glasses, and china, was pulled to the ground and scattered over the floor; the King, still with the lace clinging to his spur, staggered back against the wall beside the door and the Queen rose, rigid with anger and disgust.

Karl laughed, lifting his lip from his teeth; Count Piper stooped, tore off the lace from the King's spur, seized him by the arm and led him from the room, closing the door on the wrecked table and the grim figure of the old Queen ringing furiously her silver bell.

Dexterously the councilor guided the King's stupid steps down the short corridor; at the end of this they came face to face with two women, who were turning down the passage that led at right angles to the stairs.

One was the King's elder sister, the Duchess of Holstein, who had come with her husband to Stockholm to implore her brother's assistance; she was tall, fair, and finely made, like Karl, pure Scandinavian in type and of a demeanor rather cold.

She gave one glance under her lids at the two men and hurried on; but her companion lingered and gazed at the King with wide eyes; she was fairer than the Duchess, so fair that her hair was more like silver than gold, and her complexion more like a lily than a rose, if she should have been praised in poetry, but her eyes were a deep brown and, dilated as they were now, appeared black.

The King pushed back his draggled curls to stare at her, which he did with insolence. Count Piper tried to draw him away; the lady colored till it seemed as if a fire had dyed her in a bright reflection, and hurried away with the haste of shame.

"Viktoria," said Karl, "she is a pretty creature for a King's fancy—that woman." And he spoke so that the object of his speech must have heard.

Count Piper, with greater determination than he had yet shown, dragged at his master's arm, guided him to his own cabinet, and helped him into a chair there.

Then he closed the door and stood with his back to it; the King stared absently at his clothes stained with blood, and dirt and wine.

CHAPTER II

COUNT PIPER stood looking thoughtfully at the King; he was wondering if the young man was sober enough to make it worth while speaking to him; he doubted this, and yet time was short—a question of hours might decide the fate of Sweden.

Karl sat immovable; across his slightly upturned face fell a pale ray of sun that had faintly penetrated the clouds and entered the small room, and in this light that was so dim as to be almost colorless, the King's countenance, framed in the loose flowing, light hair, had such a strange effect that it almost startled Count Piper, even though he had known the King from babyhood and daily watched his lineaments. Very obvious now was that inhuman look, a serenity, a reserve that was neither disdain nor secrecy but mere indifference, a look of something large and noble and cold in the wide, handsome face that did not belong to ordinary mankind.

This was not attractive, this expression, it inspired a certain fear even in one as familiar with it as Count Piper—yet the King was only a haughty boy, soiled from his rough sport and drunk—a boy who had been insolent to his kinswoman and who had insulted his sister's friend almost in her presence.

"Your Majesty," said Count Piper, looking away from those calm, blank blue eyes, "will you forgo the chase to-morrow to attend the Council of State?"

The King sighed.

"Yes, I will come," he said, with a gentleness that Count Piper was not expecting.

"And give your mind to the business in hand?" added the councilor, for he could recollect council

meetings when Karl had sat in an aloof silence commonly attributed to a haughty stupidity, with his feet on the table and his hands in his pockets.

Karl slowly turned his fine head and looked at his friend.

"You are very kind to me," he remarked gravely.

"Your Majesty is not just to yourself," replied the Count.

An expression of bewilderment crossed the King's face; he put his strong, blood-stained hand to his forehead.

"I am drunk," he said.

Count Piper could not repress a movement of impatience.

"Yes, your Majesty is drunk," he replied, "and at this moment three Kingdoms are in league against you—to deprive you of all you have."

There was no response in the attitude or expression of the King.

Count Piper tried the name that had roused him to such passionate violence before.

"Is the son of Karl XI going to permit the Czar of Muscovy to add so easily to his laurels?"

Karl remained calm.

"Why are these three princes at war with me?" he asked slowly.

"Because they think that you are a foolish boy," replied Count Piper instantly. "Because they believe that in such hands as yours Sweden can do nothing against them. Denmark is your hereditary enemy—Saxony is an adventurer, keeping on foot an army at all costs—and the Czar—is the most ambitious man in Europe."

"What does he want?" asked Karl.

"All the land between the Gulf of Finland, the Baltic Sea, Poland, and Muscovy," replied the councilor laconically.

Karl laughed; it had a meaningless sound.

"My land," he said.

"Precisely, sire."

The King, still holding his head and still confused, spoke again, slowly and insistently, like a child asking artless, but to himself important questions.

"What are the Czar's objects—tell me, Count?" he asked.

The more stupidly calm his master showed the more the diplomat dared show his annoyance—after all, this boy was eighteen, of a race of heroes, carefully trained and had shown already some signs of greatness as in the matter of his coronation and his refusal to be ruled by a woman, and it was intolerable that he should sit here fuddled with wine, staring with eyes blank as those of any fool.

"The Czar needs an outlet—a fort—on the Baltic," he replied, in a tone of fierce sarcasm; "the Czar is a man of vast schemes, of a wide ambition—of a fair measure of greatness, too—he has taught his people much—he would teach them the art of war. At your expense, sire."

"And Saxony and Poland help him—yes, you told me so—we discussed this the other day."

"We have spoken of it many times," replied the counselor bitterly.

Karl did not heed him.

"And there is my poor brother Gottorp-Holstein ruined—and my sister weeping here for help," he said slowly; "that is a pretty creature she has with her, Count——"

"Will your Majesty add that to your other amusements—so soon?" interrupted Count Piper.

His glance went wistfully over the splendid young man who stared at him so stupidly. "I must learn to make my court to a Marquise de Maintenon or an Aurora von Königsmarck!" he added.

"Who is she—Aurora von Königsmarck?" asked the King.

"A thing like this piece your Majesty admires—one of those creatures who get their feet on the necks of kings!"

"Not great kings!" said Karl, with a sudden short laugh, showing his teeth in a disagreeable manner.

"Mostly great kings," replied the Count drily. "From Thäis to our poor Aurora—you may search history and you will never find your conqueror, your hero without them—and it is human nature—you can no more avoid them than you can flowers at a feast, or flags at a victory—and is this to be your Majesty's choice? I know nothing of the girl."

The King had been listening with some intentness; he unaccountably flushed.

"I like neither flowers nor flags," he said. "I will rule without women, Piper." His eyes narrowed with a look of intelligence. "Is there any king in the world now, Piper, who is free of women?"

The councilor shook his head.

"There is the King of England, sire, who is a grave and great Monarch—but he largely owed his fortunes to his wife and has been a different man since her death——"

"I will have no wife," said Karl instantly. "I will be greater than the King of England—Count, were there women in the sagas? Did the Vikings care for maids or wives?"

The older man smiled.

"I will forgive you your women, sire, and your chase, and your wine—if you will but keep Sweden great—and make her greater."

But the glow of energy had passed from the King's strange face, the broad lids dropped over the wide blue eyes.

"Talk to me later," he muttered, and turned his head away on the dark cushions of the chair.

Count Piper hesitated a moment, then, seeing that the young man was falling into a heavy sleep, he, with a little bitter shrug, left the cabinet, gently closing the door behind him, frowning as he did so with an annoyance that he could, for all his training, scarcely control.

He went straight to the apartments of the Duchess of Gottorp, the King's sister, whose husband had been the first victim of the league against Sweden.

She was in her hood and cloak, ready for some poor diversion of a ride or walk, a sad, anxious lady beneath her air of princely reserve.

The dreary air of the old palace, which was both dull and unhomelike, pervaded these apartments of the fugitive princess; she looked and felt like an exile as she drew off her gauntlet and gave her bare hand to Count Piper.

She knew that he was her ally and could be of more use to her husband than any man in Sweden, but she was surprised at seeing him now as she had just been with the Queen Dowager and had heard in what condition the King had left the table; therefore she had hoped for nothing to-day, which she had already put aside as another space of wasted time.

"Madame," said Count Piper, "you have a lady in your service named Viktoria?"

The Duchess frowned, instantly cold.

"I do not like her, Count."

"I do not think that I do," replied the Count reflectively, "but I want to speak to her, Highness."

The Duchess looked at him sharply.

"What do you know about her?" she asked quickly.

"Nothing at all," smiled Count Piper. "It is you, Madame, who should know what there is to know about this lady."

The Duchess seemed vexed.

"Her father is a great man in Gottorp—I found she had a right to come to court."

"And to come with you here, Highness, to Stockholm?" asked the Count, with a shade of regret in his voice.

"How could I help it?" demanded the Duchess on the defensive. "They were ruined—like ourselves—had lost everything. I could do nothing but offer this shelter to one who had been sacrificed in our cause."

Count Piper fingered the brown curls of the wig that hung on to the heart of his somber coat and looked reflectively at the floor; the Duchess eyed him, and her fair face was hard in the shadow of her hood and her blue eyes had darkened with emotion.

"It is not pleasant to return to one's country as I have returned—an exile and a fugitive," she said, in a heavy voice, "to wait here day by day, like a poor petitioner, to gain my brother's ear—but it is an added bitterness to think that I have brought with me one who will be a mischief in Sweden."

"So your Highness thinks of this lady as a mischief?" asked the Count thoughtfully.

"You know, sir," she replied, disdainful of pretense, "that is what you came to tell me."

"No," he said, looking at her straightly. "I think she might be useful."

"To whom?" cried the Duchess.

"To Sweden."

As the King's sister understood the King's minister, she colored swiftly and drew a step away from him.

"This is not Versailles," she said. Then in a tone of real disgust, "Heavens! would you seek to rule the King through women?"

"If it was the only way."

"A boy!"

Count Piper lifted his shoulders.

"She is the type—the temperament—they have noticed each other. He speaks of her."

"Not when he is sober," flashed the Duchess.

"Believe me, Madame," he answered gravely, "he is ensnared. And his first love. It will be serious."

The Duchess tapped her foot impatiently.

"And I came to Stockholm for this!" she exclaimed, full of contempt and revolt.

"So much depends on the lady—why should she not be our friend, Highness? The friend of Sweden? That wench might save the country if she chose to

persuade the King that way—let us use her, instead of flouting her, Madame.”

The Duchess was silent a second, struggling with a pride that bade her speak scornful words; she knew that Count Piper but followed the usual procedure of courts, but his worldly wisdom disgusted her, and, desperate as she was, and cause as she had to be angry with her brother, she did not care to think of him as sunk in foolish weakness; the men of her house had never been feeble.

Yet she knew, by a deep instinct and a jealous observation, that Viktoria had greatly attracted the King, and she thought that, bold, fair, and worldly as this woman was, she would not forgo any advantage for any scruple.

“I leave it in your hands,” she said at last. “I cannot speak to her myself. I will send her to you while I go for my walk.”

She went from the room as if not too well pleased with Count Piper, and he, left alone in the dreary atmosphere of the narrow apartment, began to slightly doubt the wisdom of the course he had set himself.

But he was aroused; he was afraid as only a brave man can be afraid, mistrustful as only a wise man can be mistrustful, roused in his pride as a statesman and as a Swede; he believed the Czar Peter to be terrible—more terrible than anyone yet guessed; ambitious, fierce, one eager to rule who yet did not disdain to learn—a dangerous combination; he believed the King of Denmark malicious and active; and the third of the King’s enemies, Augustus of Saxony, King of Poland, he believed to be equally formidable—a fribble, a rake, but an important pawn, a sharp tool in the hands of others—a valuable asset to such a man as the Czar.

Sweden had possessions all of these envied—they did not hesitate to stretch out their hands and take them from one whom they knew to be a boy and believed to be defenseless.

The two former Kings had made Sweden great—this King might lose all that greatness so easily.

Count Piper's shrewd face hardened as he thought of the tipsy youth slumbering in his cabinet; his delicate mission seemed easier as he reflected on that foolish degradation.

And it was not likely that the woman was of finer clay than the man whom she sought to enslave; Count Piper was hardened towards her with whom he had to deal before he had spoken to her; her quiet entry found him cold and prepared.

Her curtsey was slow; she had her eyes fixed on him the while.

It was the first time that he had seen her close and face to face; his practised glance noted, first that she was not a girl, secondly that she was as clever as she was fair; it was an intelligence equal to his own that looked at him out of those clear brown eyes.

And she was certainly very fair; there was no fault in her exact features, in her pure complexion, none in her exquisite form, unless it might be that she was too tall and too slender.

Her dress was over-rich and over-gay for her surroundings; a court ruled by an old woman had not seen before a creature so splendid.

Her pale blond hair was worn in cunningly disposed ringlets through which was passed a little braid of pearls, and fastened by a fair tortoiseshell comb adorned with squares of dark amber.

Her dress was of rose-colored velvet, cut low in front, with a fall of silver lace on the bosom, and showing a silver petticoat in front.

She had a great scarf of black silk wrapped like a shawl over all her attire, and no jewels at all but one square sapphire on the first finger of her right hand.

"You are very gracious, Madame, to grant me this interview," said Count Piper; he looked a dull, a wizened figure beside her radiant grace.

"Was it not a command?" asked Madame von Falkenberg.

She stood facing him, with one hand on her hip, almost in the attitude of a man who feels for his sword hilt.

"I am not powerful enough to issue commands to you, Baroness," he replied suavely.

She flashed into a sudden animation that accorded ill with her frail pallor and look of languid grace.

"I think you are not powerful enough to do anything, Count," she said, "not powerful enough, certainly, to save Sweden."

He did not understand her mood or her attitude, but he answered boldly.

"Therefore I am going to ask your help, Madame."

Viktorja von Falkenberg moved impatiently towards the window, like a creature confined against her will.

"Are you not ashamed," she asked, "that you cannot manage one wilful boy?"

This was so unexpected that Count Piper could think of no reply whatever.

"This King of yours," continued the lady, "was drunk to-day, and unwashed from the chase, sat down to his food with spotted linen and muddy boots, was rude to women—I should not be proud to be his tutor."

She had completely turned the tables on him; he had meant to tactfully reproach her with the effect of her influence on the King—to point out how Karl was drifting to disaster—and she had snatched his weapons from his hands and left him defenseless.

She threw up her head impetuously and struck her open palm on the window-pane.

"Oh, for something beautiful!" she cried, "were it but the waving of a spray of leaves against a gray sky! Your palace stifles, Count, and while we wait your King's graciousness we lose our life!"

"It is of that I would speak to you," said the Count, endeavoring to keep to his first point of view, "of your desires—and the King."

CHAPTER III

YOU think that I have any influence with your King?" asked Madame von Falkenberg.

Her directness did not displease Count Piper; he saw that she was more experienced than he had thought and wise enough to be simple.

"I know you have," he replied, then added: "His Majesty has never looked twice at any other woman."

"His Majesty is only eighteen," said Viktoria; her large dilated eyes looked searchingly at the shrewd, withered face of the minister. "What do you know of me?" she asked.

He had his answer ready.

"I know that you are of one of the noblest families in Gottorp—that you are a very attractive woman, and, I think, ambitious."

"You know nothing about my husband?"

The question seemed to Count Piper quite irrelevant.

"I know that Baron von Falkenberg was killed in a duel a few months after his marriage, and that that is five years ago."

She gave him a narrowed glance.

"And so you think that I have influence with your little King?" she demanded abruptly.

Count Piper was surprised into irritation.

"Madame, it is a Viking!" he exclaimed with pride.

Madame von Falkenberg lifted her slender shoulders.

"He seems like a child to me," she answered, "and if," she added, "you think so well of him, why do you come to bargain about him with a woman whom you think is a greedy adventuress?"

Count Piper looked at the lady with dislike; her

attitude was one with which it was impossible to deal; for all her directness she was hindering him in the object of his conversation; vexation rose in his heart against boys and women and this kind of bedchamber intrigue; he longed for such a master again as the late King had been.

"Sweden is threatened," he replied, with some sternness, "and to save her I must use any weapons I can."

"Even soiled ones," said the Baroness.

"I have not said so—but I am dealing with a youth, one who has no interest beyond his games and his sports—one who is self-confident, arrogant——"

The lady interrupted.

"And you can do nothing with him?"

"No."

"And the Queen?"

"He smiles at the Queen."

"What do you want him to do?"

"What his father would have done," replied Count Piper—"lead an army against Denmark, Poland, and Russia."

"I see—you want an antique hero—a Viking, as you say, in this modern age of ours!" She seemed scornful, and her lips shook as she spoke. "And you think that a woman's smiles can rouse a demi-god from a tipsy boy! You think that he might go to war if he could find me among the spoils of victory!"

Count Piper was silent; he could not understand her mood.

She seemed in considerable agitation and leant against the window-frame, pressing a little handkerchief to her mouth; the sharp eyes of the minister noted the stains of red on the cambric as she rubbed off the moistened rouge.

"You think to find in me an Aurora von Königs-marck—a gilded puppet whose strings you can pull!" she cried.

Count Piper felt bound to defend himself.

"Madame, you have not seemed displeased at the King's notice."

"No," flashed Viktoria, "and the Duchess has told you that she does not like me and that I am a light creature, and so you think you can affront me with impunity."

"Madame, it can be no affront to suggest that you might be the King's friend and influence him for good."

She sighed a little at these conventional words and put her thin hands, with a gesture of weariness, to her fair brow.

"Will you let me see the King, alone?" she asked quietly. "Perhaps I might be able to turn him to what is the wish of all of us."

The Count did not affect to understand this change of front, but he was eager to grasp at her suggestion.

"His Majesty is now in my cabinet," he replied.

"I wish to see him when he is sober."

"When he wakes he will be sober."

"Take me to him."

Count Piper glanced at her somewhat doubtfully; if she did become his puppet he did not think that she would be a particularly easy one to manage; so far, at least, she had shown no good-humor and a certain enmity towards himself; he agreed with the King's sister in not liking her; what charm she had, he decided, lay solely in her rather colorless beauty.

He conducted her to his cabinet without any very great hopes as to the success of his experiment, but, at least, he consoled himself, he had forced an issue that might have hung long and vexatiously, and this interview would decide how much or how little Viktoria von Falkenberg was going to count for in the life of the King of Sweden.

When the cabinet door opened Karl looked round.

He was still in the chair where Count Piper had left him and seemed to have but lately awakened.

The Baroness entered and closed the door. The King at once rose, and stood, with one hand on the

back of his chair, looking at her in rather an amazed fashion.

His eyes were clear and his hands steady; he had already thrown off the effects of the wine—an easy matter for his superb and vigorous constitution.

But his hair was still disordered, his dress disheveled and stained with blood, and dirt, and wine.

The lady, in her fair exquisiteness, rose color and silver, her finished beauty and artificial grace, was a curious contrast to the young man in his vigor and careless attire.

"Ah, Madame von Falkenberg," said the King, "who do you wish to see—Count Piper?"

"No, sir."

"This is Count Piper's cabinet," replied Karl, with a look of confusion.

"He has been lecturing your Majesty?"

The blood rushed up under the King's fair skin.

"He spoke to me of the Czar of Muscovy, but I do not rightly recall all he said."

The Baroness advanced a little; all that there was of light in the dull, small apartment seemed to be gathered in her brilliant figure.

"I also have come to speak of the Czar of Muscovy, your Majesty."

Karl looked at her doubtfully.

"Oh, yes, Count Piper sent me," she added, "but I do not come on his errand, but on my own."

The red still showed in the King's strange face; he glanced at his clothes.

"You take me at a disadvantage," he said, with dignity.

Viktoria smiled faintly.

"Ah no, sire—you have all the advantages!"

Karl suddenly smiled also; it changed his face, not agreeably.

"You think I have all I want?" he asked.

"I think that you could have."

"That rests with you, Baroness," he replied; now

that he was sober it was noticeable that his demeanor was cold and his manners of a freezing haughtiness; only towards this woman his behavior was softened; he was being as gracious as he knew how; his large serene eyes gleamed as they rested on her loveliness; he approved her openly and with a lack of all subterfuge that had something large-natured in it; indeed, it was impossible to associate him with anything small of any kind.

They stood facing each other, and for all that she was tall she was hardly to his shoulder; he stared at her, and behind all his arrogance was a certain shyness.

"Sir," she said, "it is a pity that you should depend on a woman for anything."

That seemed to strike a responsive chord in his nature; he drew up his magnificent figure and a look of intense pride darkened his face.

He put his hand to the hilt of the short sword he wore and turned away rather abruptly.

"What could I give you?" asked Viktoria softly.

He looked at her over his shoulder.

"I think you know," he said rather sullenly.

"But tell me," she insisted.

The King gave his ugly smile.

"You are such a pretty creature," he answered, "you give me more pleasure than any fair sight I have ever seen."

She did not receive his compliment in the usual fashion of blush and confusion.

"I am sorry that your Majesty has seen so few pleasant sights," she said quietly, "but you are very young."

"You think of me as very young?" demanded the King, with narrowed eyes.

"What are you, sire, but a boy?" replied the lady calmly. "Ah, when will you be a man?"

"With God's help, when I choose," he said shortly.

Viktoria von Falkenberg smiled sadly.

"Sire," she said, "I do not come to lecture you as Count Piper or the Queen do. I think I have no right to speak at all, save this little right that you have noticed me."

"I have noticed you," he interrupted heavily.

"And that others think that I might influence you," she continued.

"Ah, they think that, do they? Count Piper thinks a woman could influence me!" cried the King. "Forgive me," he added quickly, "I am not courteous."

"Indeed," replied the Baroness, still with that little fixed smile, "your Majesty is more fitted to the camp than the court."

Again the King flushed, and his eyes were narrowed and gleaming.

"Ah, I am boorish—I know," he said, then, suddenly, "but I could be gentle to a woman, a woman like you."

"I want you to be gentle to me now, sire," she replied quickly, "for what I have to say may try your patience."

"Nay, that could never be."

He did not speak in a tone of gallantry or artificial compliment, nor even with any of the confusion or shyness likely in one so young and so unused to dealing in affairs of love, but with a certain hardness and hauteur, the mark of absolute sincerity and complete self-command.

It was impossible to believe that he would ever waste himself in mere pleasantness; he did not trouble even to smile, but looked at the lady gravely with his strange blue eyes that were of so rare a color and so curious an expression.

"You think that I please your fancy," she said, with a flutter of color in her face.

"I know that you do," he replied seriously. "You are very wonderful. But Count Piper was wrong," he added grimly, "when he thought that you could influence me."

"Yet I am going to try and do so," said Viktoria.

"Yes?" he seemed faintly amused.

"I want you to forget me, to forget the chase, to leave the wine, and become the man your father was."

These words were so unexpected that for a moment his composure was disturbed.

"Forget you?" he asked.

"Sire, whether my words have any effect with you or no, after to-day I shall never speak to you alone. I am not the woman your councilor takes me to be. He thinks that I would be your plaything, and that through me he would work his way with you."

"And so you will have none of me?" asked the King quietly; "I could have loved you."

"Sire, I have done with love. And I was never ambitious."

"But I," smiled Karl, "I have not even begun with love. And I was always ambitious."

She flashed at him with sudden animation and force.

"Then if you are ambitious leave love alone. Turn your back on women until you take your Queen—be the one King in Europe who is not ruled by a petticoat. Be a man like the hero of antiquity, feared, obeyed, revered by *men*, not cajoled, flattered, led by women!"

He gave her a dazzling look.

"And if I wished I could be such a one," he said strongly.

"And do you hesitate? There is a man's work—a King's work ready to your hand—a nation that your forefathers left great looking to you for help against three terrible enemies, the world before you in which to win glory."

"And if I wished I could win it," said Karl, in the same tone.

"Sire, first you must conquer yourself—to-day you were intoxicated."

The King flushed hotly.

"You came to the Queen's table blood-stained from

the chase. You dragged the cover to the floor with your spur in the cloth. You insulted me in the corridor."

Karl looked at his disordered clothes.

"Before God," he said in broken voice, "I am sorry."

"And because of these things Count Piper resorts to a woman to influence you."

"I am ashamed," said the King. "I am ashamed. Yes, I was drunk. I went into my grandmother's presence like any stable boor—I remember now. And Count Piper led me here—and I fell asleep when he talked politics."

He hid his face in his strong hands, resting them on the back of the chair, his tangled curls falling over the dark tapestry.

Viktoría Falkenberg had not known him long, but she was quick to perceive that he was moved to emotion rare in such a nature.

She came quickly up to him, and laid her thin hand on his bowed shoulder.

"Sire, what does it matter? You are young and splendid. Think what may be before you—think what you have in your hands. What is the chase compared to war? What is wine-drinking compared to the joy of victory? What the pursuit of women compared to the pursuit of nations?"

He raised his strange face that was now quite pale.

"You are right," he said. "You are very right. I have always thought like that. Yet there seemed nothing to do. And I amused myself with games," he added simply.

"There is now plenty to do," said the lady, with a faint smile. "You must give your brother-in-law back his duchy—humble Denmark—subdue Poland—hold the Czar in check."

"You think that I could do that?" he asked quickly.

"Sire, you come of a race that has done such things."

He looked at her with an intensity almost painful.

"You are interested in me, but yet you do not care about me."

"I do not love you, sire," she replied quietly. "I loved once. It was enough. I loved my husband and he did not love me. For the sake of another woman he was killed soon after our marriage."

She drew from behind the silver lace on her bosom a golden locket which she opened, and showed no portrait, but a fragment of blood-stained rag.

"That I cut from above his heart the day they brought him home," she said. "It is all I care for in the world. I—I have suffered so much that it is as if I had died. That is why, sire, I can speak to you so coldly now."

The King looked at her calmly; by contrast with her own words she herself appeared insignificant, his fancy for her, which she might have formed into the strongest passion his cold nature was capable of, had died on the instant before the images her words had evoked.

No one had ever spoken to him directly with strength and sincerity; the sneers of his grandmother he had always despised and everyone else had been his inferior, not daring to tell him plainly that which men thought of him and his actions.

Never before either had he been so degraded as to-day when he had returned to the palace intoxicated and shown himself so before women, and in the revulsion of shame and disgust that he felt the words that this lady had dared to speak to him made the deeper impression.

He looked at her with respect and a slight amazement; she seemed thin and pale and artificial in her gorgeous stiff gown, very different from the heroines of his beloved sagas—yet she had shown qualities that were admirable in his eyes.

"Enough," he said suddenly. "I think I have done with childish things. I have had my dreams—maybe

some of them I can realize. I thank you, Madame, for your timely speech."

He offered her no compliment nor courtesy and his expression, as he gazed at her, was hard, but she believed that she had accomplished her purpose and she did not care how soon he forgot her; she had very truly done with the emotions of love and vanity.

"I thank you for your attention," she replied gently. "I have, sire, no more to say."

With a little curtsey she left him; he did not give a sigh to her going, but turned with brusque eagerness to study the map of North Europe that hung above Count Piper's desk; with intent blue eyes and a steady finger he traced the positions of those provinces his three enemies wished to wrest from Sweden.

CHAPTER IV

HE was eighteen years of age, of a superb constitution, perfect health, and noble descent, absolute monarch of a prosperous and well-governed country, troubled by neither plots among his nobility nor factions among his people.

He felt as if the world had been put into his hands, as a small globe to crush or fondle; his deep but hitherto sleeping pride, his vast and arrogant ambition were now finally roused by the humiliation into which his idle habits had led him, and the direct words of the woman who had attracted his cold fancy by her pretty, sad grace.

As a personality she was now dismissed from his thoughts, but he dwelt on her speech with a deep, mighty resolve forming in his powerful mind.

In every way he was equipped to play a great part in history; his father, a stern, just, and haughty prince, had educated him with great care and wisdom; his natural gifts for languages and mathematics had been developed by training and diligence; he was proficient in history and geography, well-versed in the lives of the heroes of ancient Greece and Rome whose example suited his temperament, and familiar with the sagas of Scandinavia, the only form of any art that had ever moved him; his understanding was beyond the common, and he had not as yet displayed any vice or weakness likely to obscure his fine qualities, beyond this indolent absorption in rude sports that he had shown since he came to the throne; he was neither cruel and given to abuse of power nor was he liable to the weakness of being led by flatterers. His notice of Viktoria Falken-

berg was the first attention that he had ever accorded a woman.

He seemed to be without affection and without passion; to his father he had shown the only obedience he had ever displayed to a human being; his mother he had despised, for he had early observed how slight a value his father had set upon her gentleness and how harshly he had treated her; his feelings towards his sisters were the same, the old Queen he could only tolerate by ignoring. Count Piper, the one man to whom he had shown special favor, he liked but was not fond of, nor had he any warm feelings towards his country which he admired only inasmuch as it was his own.

He was conscious only of the desire to dominate, to be without a rival as he was without a master; and, now that the words of Viktoria Falkenberg had taken root in his mind, to be great, to master kings, and nations, and peoples, and stride over them to fresh conquests; the reinstatement of his brother-in-law, Sweden's ancient ally, the Duke of Holstein-Gottorp, in his dominions, was a good excuse for him to enter the arena of European politics where his fellow-monarchs considered him too young to play any part.

The true greatness of his strange character showed in his haughty resolve to conquer himself before ever he attempted to overcome his enemies.

He decided to be the one King without weakness or vices, and as easily as he took off his soiled garments of the chase he cast from him the vulgar amusements and rude diversions that had hitherto occupied his leisure.

The evening of the day that Viktoria Falkenberg had spoken to him he joined the Queen at her supper table.

His two sisters were present and the husband of the eldest, the Duke of Holstein-Gottorp.

Karl took his place at the head of the table; he was now absolutely sober and extremely cold in his de-

meanor; his disordered clothes of the morning had been changed for garments of black velvet and a muslin cravat fastened by a white pearl; his bright and waving hair was confined by a broad black ribbon save the foremost locks which fell over his shoulders; in this grave style of dressing, with his great height and noble person, he appeared much older than his years.

The Queen, who had, as usual, a bitter speech ready for him, snapped her lips together after she had glanced at his face; when he was master of himself she was afraid of him; he gave her a by no means friendly glance and his beautiful eyes traveled to the harassed countenance of his brother-in-law and the quiet faces of his sisters; the Queen, who was watching him shrewdly and with no predisposition in his favor, noticed that now more than ever before he dominated his company; the women, Count Piper, the young Duke all seemed pale and incomplete, like people cut out of paper, compared to his calm and overwhelming personality.

He did not sit down, but, pouring out a glass of wine, raised it almost to the level of his lips.

"Madame," he said, addressing the Queen, "I must ask your pardon for my great discourtesy and boorishness to-day. I do ask it. I ask these gentlewomen to forgive me some insolences. I was not sober. That will never happen again."

He paused for a second; there was no flush in his face, his eyes looked as hard as sapphires; he never glanced to where Viktoria Falkenberg sat beside the Duchess of Gottorp.

"I drink your health, Madame," he continued, bowing towards the old Queen, "and I drink it in the last wine I shall ever taste."

He emptied his glass and set it down quietly. "And now forgive me my absence," he said. "I have much to attend to. Count, will you wait upon me later?"

Without pausing for a reply he left the room.

The Queen wiped her lips in a certain grim satisfaction.

"Well," she remarked, "he is capable of keeping his word."

Count Piper glanced at the downcast and weary face of Viktoria Falkenberg; she sat next to him and spoke, under the little murmur of talk that had arisen since the King's departure.

"He will do, your master," she said, "he is quite heartless, quite just, and inhumanly strong."

"You spoke to him?"

She raised her eyes.

"Our interview was not what you think. We have really no interest in each other."

Count Piper could not pretend to understand her; nor did he really care to explore the intricacies of feminine sentiment and feminine intrigue; if Viktoria Falkenberg was not going to influence King Karl she ceased to in the least concern Count Piper.

"His Majesty will help Gottorp, you think?" asked the Duchess.

"I think so," said Count Piper.

He hastened his dinner that he might rejoin the King, who was already, he knew, in his cabinet.

And there he found him, standing by the window through which the long Northern twilight fell into the narrow apartment; his arms were locked over the back of a high chair and he leant forward, in the attitude of one dreaming.

Though he was so splendid in his magnificent youth there was something in his demeanor more terrifying than lovable, and his proud noble face was marred by the ugly smile that curved his full lips.

As soon as the Count entered he spoke, without raising his head.

"I shall go to war," he said, and his voice that was always expressionless had a hard ring in its clear quality. "I shall return Gottorp to his duchy and I shall engage Denmark. Saxony must be brought from the

throne of Poland, and from these I menace this Emperor of Muscovy—this Czar of the Russias.”

“I believe,” replied Count Piper, with perfect sincerity, “that your Majesty can do these things.”

“I believe that I can,” said Karl. “The most dangerous of my foes is Russia. He affects to be a mighty man, does he not?”

It was plain that this greatness of the Czar rankled with him; it was almost as if he had a personal hatred of this political enemy of his country whom he had never seen; this was the only person towards whom he had ever evinced the faintest anger or jealousy.

“The Czar is great,” replied the Count, “but your Majesty might be greater.”

“I would like to break him!” exclaimed the young man looking up. With that startling flash in the darkening blue of his eyes, he looked more human, more moved than Count Piper had ever known him. “’Tis a savage, a Tartar . . . and he defies me . . . wants my provinces . . . *mine*, by God . . . you have seen me drunk to-day, you will not see that again . . . we will see if the Czar drunk can match me sober . . . and Poland with his Aurora. . . . I will have no women, Count.”

He seemed greatly moved by a deep and restrained emotion.

“You owe something to one woman,” thought Count Piper, “if she has wrought this change of mind in you.”

And he wondered what Viktoria Falkenberg had said.

“Russia does not think that anyone is likely to oppose him,” continued Karl. “Is it not so? He believes that there is no man in Europe would face him and his savages.”

“He certainly thinks,” replied the minister, “that your Majesty will be easily despoiled. ’Tis a man with many noble qualities who seeks to bring his country forward in an honorable manner in Europe—yet unscrupulous and fierce—a barbarian teaching civilization to others—

but," he added, "before your Majesty thinks of Russia, there is Denmark."

"I attend the council to-morrow," said Karl, "and in a week's time I hope to leave Sweden. The Dutch and English will help us—at least indirectly. I think it is not to King William's interest that I should be overwhelmed. I mean to make a feint on Copenhagen and compel Denmark to a peace."

"The Danish fleet protects Spaelland, sire," said Count Piper quickly.

"But I have looked at the map," replied the King, "and I see that one might pass through the Eastern Sound."

"Which is not held to be navigable, sire."

Karl did not seem to pay much attention to this remark.

"King Frederick is older than I, by ten years," he said, reflectively. "Do you think that he is a great man, Count?"

"He is popular in Denmark, sire."

"I am vexed," added Karl, "that I let him take Got-torp—but," he paused, then seemed to resolve to say no more on that subject. "England and the Netherlands will stand by us?" he asked.

"They certainly will not wish to see Denmark in possession of the commerce of the North, nor the Czar of Russia overspread his dominions. I believe we could count on the junction with the Anglo-Dutch fleet."

"And Poland marches on Livonia," said the King. "I hear his Saxon soldiers are very fine troops."

"One thing has just come to my ears, sire—Patkul is with Poland."

The King's face hardened instantly at mention of this man who had led the Livonian revolts that had disturbed his father's reign and whose intrigues had broken out again on his own accession; Patkul had been the only jarring note in the last years in Sweden; and rebellion was a hideous sin in the King's rigid code of honor.

"When I make peace with Poland," he said, "I shall bid him send back to me the traitor Patkul."

Count Piper looked at him curiously; the certainty of his speech, the confidence of his bearing were amazing things, for they were entirely free from braggart vanity or youthful swagger.

The King saw his minister's glance and slightly flushed.

"Perhaps," he said quickly, "I seem vainglorious in my speech, but I was not thinking of myself, but of Sweden—Sweden could do great things, do you not think so, Count?"

It was like an attempt to conciliate, and the minister could not forbear a smile.

"Under such a King as you will be, sire," he replied sincerely.

"Well," said Karl, with his strange simplicity, "I do not see that it should be very difficult to defeat these three Kings."

The next day he made his appearance at the council board in a mood different from any in which he had appeared there before.

The councilors had been used to seeing him with his feet on the table and his hands in his pockets, lolling and yawning; now he came erect and composed among them, and in a few words announced his intention of making war on Denmark, Poland, and Russia.

This swift facing of their enemies was not what the council had been expecting; they had already begun to consider the advisability of negotiations with the three sovereigns who were taking advantage of the youth of their King.

But Karl's words left no doubt as to his intention and his spirit.

"Sirs," he said, "I have resolved to never make an unjust war, but never to finish a just one save by the conquest of my enemies. My decision is taken—I shall attack him who first—who has declared himself

against me, and when I have vanquished him I shall hope to inspire some fear in the others."

That same evening he heard that the Saxon troops of the King of Poland, the regiments of Brandenburg, Wolfenbüttel, and Hesse-Cassel were marching to the assistance of the King of Denmark, who after having taken Gottorp was besieging the town of Tönning in Holstein.

Against these were sent 8000 Swedes, some troops from Hanover and Zell, and three Dutch regiments, Holland, as well as England, having taken up arms against Denmark on the excuse of her having broken the Treaty of Altona.

In the early days of April, King Karl took private leave of his family (a cold farewell of his sisters and the Queen), and, accompanied by Count Piper, the Duke of Holstein-Gottorp, and General Rehnsköld, left his capital for the port of Karlskrona, where he embarked on his flagship "The King Karl," which was mounted with 120 pieces of cannon, and at the head of forty-three ships set sail for Copenhagen, on his first campaign.

As the shores of Sweden were receding behind them Count Piper told the King that he had heard that Viktoria Falkenberg was very ill; he had wondered that Karl had not remarked her absence from attendance on his sister.

"Ah, Viktoria Falkenberg," said the King thoughtfully. He offered no comment, and that was the last time he ever spoke her name.

BOOK II

PETER ALEXIEVITCH

"C'était par des actions plus étonnantes que des victoires qu'il cherchait le nom de Grand."—VOLTAIRE.

CHAPTER I

THE short Russian summer was in the commencement of its glory; a clear sunshine penetrated the groves of beeches and firs, the thickets of lilac and senna plant, and shone on the brilliant flowers that carpeted the woods which spread about the wide estuary at the mouth of the Neva. Here and there, through the radiant blossoms, could be seen a glimpse of cold blue sea; the sky was of the pale green tint peculiar to the last hours of the day; no sound disturbed the peace of the little house on the lake in the woods, the residence that it pleased the Czar of Russia to call "Marli," in imitation of the French King, and which was one of his favorite places of retreat, being, indeed, more suited to his tastes than the gorgeous palaces he had built in Russia and the antique magnificence of the Kremlin.

It had also the advantage of being near to Cronstadt, the port he was building and in which he took such a personal interest, where he kept the nucleus of the Navy he was creating and of which he was so intensely proud, and where he had personally worked at some of the twenty-six trades that he had learnt in his journey through Europe.

Save during the brief loveliness of the summer there was little beauty in these marshy woods; neither birds

nor animals seemed to inhabit them and the stillness and the vastness added to the melancholy of the solitude.

Marli was a two-storied house with a tiled roof, a door with plain steps and a window above with a balcony.

It had no defined garden but stood solitary in the woods; it was not far from the swamps where the Czar had resolved to build his new capital, nor from the spot where his favorite Mentchikoff was raising a superb palace, but it had, despite the bright flowers and the sunshine, an air of solitude that was dreary.

There was no sign of cultivation round the lake, and the wild flowers grew up to the very door, bending over the shallow steps; the yellow plaster front of the house was stained with damp and the windows were without curtains, the shutters being all fastened back. The door stood open and there was no sign of servants or of any domestic work being in progress.

At the edge of the lake and looking up at the house was a man whose appearance and attire were in entire contrast to his surroundings.

He was tall and stoutly built, with dark hair and eyes and an expression of some fierceness, his locks were cut short into his neck, and he was attired in native Russian costume untouched by European fashion.

His long coat of fine gold-colored silk brocade, shot with blue and red flowers, was open on a vest of fine muslin, fastened with sapphire buttons, and belted above the full skirt with scarlet leather.

His full breeches of pale blue velvet were gathered into high vermilion leather boots, much polished and soft.

He carried a short sword of Oriental design, the hilt studded with tourmaline and rose quartz, and wore a close cap of scarlet silk round which was twisted a fine gold chain which held in place a buckle of diamonds that clasped a long white osprey. After looking at the little house thoughtfully this personage went slowly round the lake and in at the open door.

The two front rooms were closed; the newcomer went to the back and looked into the kitchen; it was here very

hot, for the cooking stove was lit and several dishes stood on it from which exhaled an odor of onions, cabbages, and rancid grease.

On a side table stood pots and pans and dishes containing fish under vinegar and salted gherkins, also some jams and jellies and a few fine spoons of silver gilt; flies and mosquitoes buzzed over everything; all was dirty; the floor and the stove filthy with dropped grease and spillings of food.

A Tartar servant with a flat yellow face was watching the cooking; he wore a soiled blue blouse and trousers; his throat and chest were bare and the perspiration rolled from under his oily hair.

He regarded the newcomer with a look of complete stupidity and turned his gaze again to his cooking.

He appeared to be no more impressed by the gentleman's brilliancy than the gentleman was by his dirt and disorder. Only, as that person was leaving the kitchen, the taciturn servant vouchsafed a warning.

"If you come with unpleasant news, Danilovitch Mentchikoff, you had better keep them for a while."

"He is in a bad humor?" asked the Prince quickly.

"He was drinking all night," replied the Tartar. "And now he seems to be in a melancholy. What am I to do about the dinner, Danilovitch Mentchikoff? He will not bear me in the room—and as for you, he will beat you like a dog."

"Well, when he has beaten me, we will have dinner," replied the Prince, and he turned away and went upstairs.

He entered the front bedroom which was that with the balcony over the door; a good-sized chamber very plainly furnished with a low bed, a table, a few chairs, and one or two half-open boxes filled with clothes.

The pale melancholy light streamed in uninterrupted through the curtainless window and lit every crevice of the apartment.

Above the bed was an ikon of the Saviour, very dark and indistinct and adorned with plates of silver;

two candles in sticks of violet jasper stood on a shelf beneath this; on the stove was the unfinished model of a ship in wood; these were the only remarkable objects that the room contained.

The one occupant was a young man who sat in a low chair by the stove, and who was intent on carving with a small knife a large fir cone.

Peter Alexievitch, Emperor of Muscovy and Czar of all the Russias, was at this time twenty-eight years of age, and it was not long since he had been recalled by rebellion at home from that extraordinary journey in disguise round Europe whereby he had sought to learn the various means by which nations secure prosperity and greatness, that he might instruct his subjects; he had since gained some glory by a victory over the Turks, but his present league with Poland and Denmark against Sweden was his first real entry into war and politics, the first attempt to put into practise the schemes by which he sought to render his vast Empire secure and mighty.

He did not look up as Prince Mentchikoff entered, but continued, with ostentatious disregard of a presence he was certainly aware of, to chip at the pine cone.

His friend, standing inside the door, eyed him with some apprehension.

The Czar's appearance was as remarkable as his character and his history.

Unlike the Prince, he wore European clothes, a shirt of very fine linen, much ruffled, faded green cloth breeches, white cotton stockings and leathern shoes, and over all a full dressing-gown of brown wool which was tied round his waist by a cord.

Even as he sat so, doubled up on a low chair, it was noticeable that he was of gigantic height, and slender and graceful in his proportions; the hands that were busy with his minute work were slim and elegant, his head was of a noble shape and covered with smooth short curls of a dusky brown color; his face, of an Asiatic type, was singularly beautiful, though already marred by passion and vice.

The short blunt features were finely formed, the dark eyes, large, lustrous, and full of sweetness, eagerness, and ardor, the complexion of a warm brown, darkened by exposure to sun and wind; a close mustache outlined the full lips; for the rest he was well shaven, and there was something both robust and boyish in the smooth contours of his face.

He was extremely attractive and gave the impression of being simple and lovable to an almost childish degree; his complexion, naturally so smooth and clear, was now rather pale, the eyes heavy and stained beneath; the hand that held the knife very slightly shook.

Mentchikoff noticed a dirty glass full of flies on the floor beside him and a number of bottles, mostly empty, scattered about, a strong smell of brandy being in the air.

"I come, as you bade me, to dine with your Majesty," said the favorite.

Peter did not even look round; he took a pinch of clay from a board on top of the stove and began to model it on to the fir cone.

The Prince was vexed by this reception; he had begun to think he could do what he liked with the Czar, who had raised him from the position of a pastry cook's lad to that of greatest noble in all the Russias.

"Well, Peter Alexievitch," he said drily, "there is some news that you must hear. But I would keep it till after dinner."

Peter turned now; one side of his face twitched in a slight convulsion.

"Why did not this news come to me?" he asked sullenly.

Mentchikoff saw that whatever his potations had been he was now sober, and went warily accordingly; the Czar sober was not so easy as the Czar drunk.

"Who dares to come to your Majesty when you are withdrawn into your solitude? Therefore the dispatches from Moscow were brought to me."

"Is it bad news?" asked the Czar gloomily; he

turned again to his work, and began coloring the clay with his finger dipped in rough pigment which he had arranged on the same board as the clay.

"Well," said Mentchikoff, "I certainly think that your Majesty should be at Moscow."

And irritated at his reception he seated himself near the window with an air of impatience.

"I will not go to Moscow," said the Czar, in a tone of suppressed violence. "I wish to be here—this is where I will build my city and my fort. Why cannot I be alone here? I care nothing for your news."

"Well, then," replied Mentchikoff exasperated, "it will not destroy your appetite, Peter Alexievitch. The King of Sweden has defeated Denmark, taken back Holstein-Gottorp, and signed a victorious peace."

Peter stared.

"The King of Sweden!" he ejaculated.

"Yes, that boy who was to be so easily despoiled. Europe remembers nothing like it. In fifteen days he has ended the campaign."

The Czar's face was a ghastly color.

"This is greatness," he said.

With the mechanical movement of one who has received a shock he continued his work, staring at the clay he continued to mold and color.

"Eighteen years old," added Mentchikoff, "and his first campaign."

"Tell me about it," said Peter, in an agitated and humbled manner.

"Do you really want to hear?" asked the Prince in some surprise; he had known the Czar to have messengers of ill-tidings knouted.

"I want to hear," replied Peter, without looking up.

"Well, the Swedes made a descent on Copenhagen and joined the Anglo-Dutch fleet by Spaelland—they sailed through the Eastern Channel of the Sound, a thing not before thought possible—and then they landed and attacked Copenhagen by land."

"The King led them?"

"The King led them—he was the first to land, and waded with the water to his waist and his sword in his hand—under the musket fire of the Danes, you perceive. There was a short engagement in which the Swedes were completely victorious, and Copenhagen lay at their mercy."

"Where was King Frederick?" asked Peter.

"I do not know—still besieging Tönning, I suppose—at least he sent to negotiate."

"To negotiate!" cried the Czar, looking round.

"Sire—the Baltic Sea was covered with the Swedish ships, King Karl master of Seeland, Copenhagen beseeching mercy—but our young hero must do the magnanimous—he fought not for conquest, he said, but justice. In brief, there was a congress called at Tarrenthal and there is a peace to be signed this month."

"And what are the terms?"

Mentchikoff shrugged his shoulders.

"Sweden wants nothing for himself—Gottorp is to get his indemnity and his Duchy, and Denmark is never to meddle again against Sweden."

Peter was silent a moment he was still very pale and one side of his face twitched convulsively.

"What news from Poland?" he asked at length.

"There were those dispatches yesterday, but you would not listen to them."

"Tell them to me now."

"Augustus has raised the siege of Riga."

"Why?" demanded the Czar, trembling all over.

"The excuse is that the town is full of Dutch merchandise and Poland would not offend Holland. The truth is that Augustus could not take the town."

"Curse Augustus and curse Frederick," said the Czar heavily.

He put down the little toy he was making and clasped his head in his hands.

"So of all the enemies of this young man there remains but yourself, Peter Alexievitch."

The Czar was silent; he could have imagined no

greater blow than this appearance of a rival to his glory in Northern Europe, a man ten years younger than himself who had already achieved what he never had.

How often had not Peter dreamed of dictating terms to a conquered city and setting conditions of peace to vanquished Kings, of seeing a great many obey his commands and thousands of fine soldiers march behind him to conquest; all things that this youth had experienced in a few days, while he, Peter, had been indulging himself in a sullen retirement broken only by those drunken debauches with which he sought to cure the terrible melancholy that periodically assailed him.

A bitter scorn of himself, a bitter envy of the King of Sweden, a wild yearning to be other than he was, settled on him like the mantle of despair.

"Tell me what this young man is like," he asked, in a muffled voice; his curiosity as to what was admirable and good and great was insatiable; even now it dominated his emotion.

Prince Mentchikoff did not know much; this young hero, whose name was now in everyone's mouth, was a new figure in Europe.

"He is very austere and prides himself on his justice, they say, and his army is so disciplined that they are at prayers twice a day, and they pay for all they take and do not despoil the dead. But this young man must be ambitious—he will lose his head."

"You know nothing about it, Danilovitch," replied Peter, "they are brave and cold, the Swedes. And this boy was well-trained and taught," he added enviously.

"Well," said the Prince, "he is something to be reckoned with—and I hear from Stockholm that he is angry with the four envoys you have sent. He thinks that when you are at war you should drop the pretense of peace—he is of a rigid honor."

"Oh!" said Peter.

He glanced up at the toy he had made; it represented an old woman in cap and shawl, the cone being her skirt and the upper part being cunningly fashioned of clay.

"That is what I can do," he added fiercely.

The Prince swung on his heel with some impatience. "You should be in Moscow," he declared. "Will you wait till the Swede is over the frontier?"

The Czar did not reply.

"The Saxons have left Livonia," continued Mentchikoff goadingly. "Patkul has proved a poor statesman and the treaty of Préobrapenskoë a failure—you can go on building Cronstadt and St. Petersburg, for this war is over."

The Czar gave his friend an ugly look; his hands trembled on his knees.

"Do you think that this boy has vanquished me?" he cried.

"I think that he may, Peter Alexievitch."

The Czar sprang to his feet.

"Faithless, insolent, and foolish!" he shrieked, in an instant at the height of passion. "Where did you find the courage to presume on my kindness! Have you forgotten that I am Peter!"

The Prince stood passive, only holding up his hands to protect his face; the Czar grappled with him and flung him down; Mentchikoff prostrated himself at his master's feet, face downwards on the dirty floor.

Peter was not mollified by this submission; he took off his belt and beat the shoulders of the favorite until the gay brocade was torn to ribbons.

He ceased as suddenly as he had begun, and staggered out into the head of the stairs, dragging his shirt open at the throat.

The Tartar servant was coming up with dishes on a tray; Peter gave one glance at the food then tipped it all out of the man's hands so that cabbage, soup, and fish rolled down the stairs; then he gave a great cry that seemed like a shout for air and fell backwards; a little foam flecked his lips and his eyes turned in his head.

The Prince and the Tartar with the air of men doing a usual thing, dragged and pushed him somehow to his bed.

CHAPTER II

THE Czar Peter lay at full length on his camp bedstead, his hand at his forehead, sheltering his eyes, his mind full of bitter and angry thoughts.

Seated on a low chair near him was Danilovitch Mentchikoff, who regarded him with an expression like that of a favorite dog who has been beaten, and who waits patiently until his master chooses to forgive him.

For two reasons Mentchikoff would take anything, blows, kicks, and violent abuse, from Peter; first because of the traditional implicit obedience of a Russian towards the Czar, a sentiment that had caused men dying under torture to bless the monarch who had condemned them, and secondly because he loved and revered Peter with a deep, passionate fidelity.

Insolent towards all the world, easy and familiar even with his master, with whom he frequently presumed too far, he yet never resented any caprice that humbled him by word, look, or whip; he did not fawn from policy but from an intense devotion to the man whom he considered the greatest in the world.

There were some elements of greatness also in Danilovitch Mentchikoff; he shared not only the Czar's views, but some of his capacity for carrying them out; he had been his companion in the labors of the dockyards of Amsterdam and Wapping, as well as in the barbaric splendors of Russia; he also had seen and judged that Western civilization that the Czar burned to emulate; he also dreamed the same dreams of the future greatness and glory of his country, and to this cause was eager to devote his strength and his intellect.

Some personal ambition colored his attitude; Peter had raised him from cook-boy to page, from page to noble, friend, minister; he was already wealthy, honored, feared, but though he might be an insolent tyrant to all the world, to the man who had raised him he was absolutely submissive, even abject in his love and admiration.

Peter, whose nature was warm and affectionate, loved this creature of his own making, to whom he allowed liberties never permitted to the most powerful of his boyars, but he had more often than once made Mentchikoff the victim of his insane furies in a manner that had nearly cost him his life; but the servant had never uttered a sound of complaint, and, when the outburst was over, had never failed to drag himself, bruised and bleeding and faint, to lick the boots and kiss the hand of the man who had chastised him.

He now was watching the Czar with some anxiety; he had been vexed for the last few weeks because Peter had made no steps in the campaign against Sweden, but, seized with one of his attacks of melancholy, had retired to Marli to brood over the plans of Cronstadt and St. Petersburg and drink himself into fits of false gayety that were followed by black and dangerous depression.

And now the blow had fallen; a new captain had arisen who in a few days had forced Denmark into peace; Poland was retiring from Riga; a young, vigorous King who had shown himself possessed of resolution and martial genius, with a perfectly equipped, trained, and victorious army behind him, was free to turn his attention to the third enemy who had so wantonly provoked him.

Mentchikoff's long dark and rather haggard face was shadowed with anxiety.

Not only did he wish his master's political and military schemes to fructify, he wished the Czar to be personally great and without rival in this greatness.

He was concerned that Russia should have Livonia

and a port on the Baltic, he had concurred in the plans laid down by Patkul, but he was still more concerned that Peter Alexievitch should shine resplendent, without a rival, in the Northern firmament.

Already he hated Karl of Sweden, who had the advantage in education, tradition, and breed; who was controlled, humane, just, and honorable—with none of these things could even the blind devotion of Mentchikoff credit Peter—and who had the added interest of his extreme youth and the justice of his quarrels; a young warrior, stern, outraged, fighting only those who had attacked him, conquering easily, and, with a haughty generosity, claiming no benefits from his victory, but only the restoration of his friend to what was rightfully his—this was a figure on heroic lines and one sure to appeal to the imaginations of men.

And how would the world account Peter by contrast?

A half-savage monarch of an almost wholly Eastern realm, never yet taken seriously into the reckoning in the affairs of Europe, one who had taken eccentric means to learn the means of civilizing his people and who yet was notoriously incapable of controlling his own meanest passions, one who had been guilty of fierce cruelty and bitter revenge and excesses beyond ordinary debauchery—how did such a one show beside the cold, stead fast, calm, and mighty figure of the young King of Sweden?

Mentchikoff was jealous for his hero, who to him was the greatest man on earth; Peter's faults were not faults to him; he came of a people long used to cruelty in their rulers, it was in his blood and in his training to submit to tyranny, but he had been the Czar's companion in his journey through Europe and he had seen, with his strong native shrewdness and perception, the qualities admired and respected by civilized peoples, and he knew exactly where Peter failed to reach the standard of the West—it was one to which he could not attain himself, but that did not prevent

him from keenly observing his master's failure. He still passionately dreamed of seeing the Czar a King after the fashion of the Kings of France and England, and had been one with him in every effort to attain this end; so complete was the devotion and abnegation of Danilovitch Mentchikoff that his life was one with his master's life, his glory and ambition one with the glory and ambition of Peter Alexievitch. And the Czar's moods, melancholies, and passions, that went so far to hinder his glorious schemes and tarnish his brilliant qualities, caused the keenest pangs to the fiercely loyal heart of his servant.

And now there was this new hero to reckon with; a man such as Peter was not and never could be.

The long figure at which the Prince gazed with his small brilliant eyes stirred on the rude bed; Peter dropped the arm that shielded his eyes and stared before him.

He also had his thoughts of Karl of Sweden; they were as intense and bitter as those of Danilovitch Mentchikoff.

He was conscious of his own greatness, conscious of his own failings, and overwhelmed by the task which destiny and his own will had laid on his shoulders.

He was the master of a continent, the undisputed lord of millions of human beings, enveloped in a grandeur almost mythical, possessed of a power almost godlike; better for him if he had been content with this, satisfied as his ancestors had been satisfied by an enclosed splendor, instead of being tortured by dreams of making Russia what she had never been, what she perhaps never could be.

All the sciences, the arts, the trades and commerces that had been the result of such slow and painful growth in Europe, he hoped in one generation to implant in the sterile soil of a nation almost wholly savage from the point of view of the West.

A great capital must be built, a great port made, a trained army raised, a navy built, trade established,

people educated in commerce and handicrafts—marshes drained, forests cleared, swamps turned into profitable ground—his people must learn the utmost resources of their country and how to turn them to account.

The beautiful arts of other countries must be introduced and made to flourish; all that was wonderful, fair, or great must find a home in Russia.

Such were the dreams of Peter; his breed, his tradition, his character were against these dreams.

Half an Asiatic, his type was largely Eastern, his outlook wholly so; he was nearer Timour Beg than Louis XIV, despite his admiration of this latter ideal of kingship.

He had admired Europe and copied Europe and envied Europe—he had little in common with Europe.

His story was one of a violence and terror difficult to find in the annals of any country but this, full of dark splendor, of flights, revolts, dangers, imprisonments; the brother who had shared his throne had disappeared to a mysterious death, the sister who had been his regent was languishing in a close prison; he was separated from his wife, his one son was sickly, almost witless.

In his blood lurked horrible diseases; his brother had been an idiot, tortured by convulsions, his sister was afflicted by dropsy and ulcers, he himself had been given to epilepsy since childhood; unbridled passions, unlimited power, unchecked lusts had tainted his whole race with a mental unbalance akin to insanity; melancholy, nightmare horrors of glooms and broodings, wild extravagance of thought and action were in his heritage.

Heavier burdens even than the scepter of all the Russias had come from his forefathers to Peter Alexievitch; clouding and torturing his brain and body were the dread shadows of mortal maladies, the black form of madness. No one knew his sufferings; he himself was ignorant of their cause and terrified at their power; only alcohol could allay them, and then the payment exacted was horrible as death in agonies.

The dark horrors of delirium, the monstrous fancies of fever, the tortuous labyrinths of the underground ways by which the borderland of delusions, dreams, hallucinations, and unbidden imaginings leads to the utter starless abyss of insanity were often more real to Peter than the strenuous world in which he lived; shadows from realms that he tried to deny the existence of, ghastly gleams from hells at which his soul dared not glance, clouded and colored his thoughts and his actions.

A continent was at his feet and he had undertaken a task as tremendous as any man had yet put his hand to—but even this was not sufficient to distract him from the terrors of the unseen and the unheard who haunted those foul, secret places where his soul was doomed to wander.

He was weak now after his fit and there was a dullness on his spirit almost akin to peace; he was frowning, and his beautiful eyes were well stained with blood, but his glance sought with a certain gratitude the cool peace of the green beyond the square window, and he was glad of the quiet, watchful presence of his friend.

"Danilovitch," he said, in a low voice, "I must get back to Moscow," then "If Cronstadt were built and I had a navy, I would batter this boy by sea."

He sat up slowly, a languid, graceful figure in the soiled dressing-gown; he had bitten his tongue when he fell and his mouth was still marked with blood; a few tiny spots of red were on the front of the fine cambric shirt; his forehead was damp with perspiration and the soft glossy curls hung in wild disorder; yet his face, so round in the contours still, with a certain bloom and freshness, attractive, gentle in expression, was the face of a youth, sensitive and dreamy.

Prince Mentchikoff did not answer; he was not yet sure of his master's mood and feared to say something that might irritate him.

"And if I had an army I could batter him by land," added Peter, with a hard smile.

"Your Majesty has an army," ventured Mentchikoff.

"Has it ever been tried in battle?" demanded the Czar grimly. "Is there anyone in the whole of Russia who knows anything of the art of war?"

"It is for you to teach them," ventured the Prince.

"There is much I have to teach Russia," remarked the Czar.

He stood up, to the full of his great height, and pushed back his hair impatiently with both damp hands.

"Is this how I get my Baltic port?" he cried scornfully. "Is this how I wrest a province from Sweden? I should have been in Moscow months ago."

"God knows you should, Peter Alexievitch," said Mentchikoff mournfully.

"But I had to labor with my hands, Danilovitch, there is no other cure for these infernal torments. I must make things, and be near the sea."

The Prince knew that Peter alluded to the black melancholy fits to which he was subject and made no reply.

"This boy now," continued the Czar, in a quieter tone, "he would be sober? Not chased by phantoms or mocked by the infernal ones, eh, Danilovitch?"

"A cold Norseman," replied Mentchikoff. "They say that for this campaign at least, his life has been austere."

"That is it," replied Peter, with an eagerness that was almost wistful, "an austere life—to train the body, to eat bread and drink water, to sleep on the ground, to live as the meanest foot soldier—and I could do it—if he, why not I?"

Then, in a sudden fit of gloom, he added:

"I have no troops worth naming beyond the Strelitz and the Germans—savages, peasants, this King will laugh at me—and Riga is lost and Tönning? Curse both the Saxon and the Dane."

He spoke wearily, without passion; Mentchikoff rose and touched him gently, with an infinite tenderness, on the arm.

"Come, Peter Alexievitch," he said softly, "come out and look at the sea."

He had never known when a glimpse even of the ocean had failed to soothe the Czar.

Peter did not reply, and Mentchikoff deftly drew off the dressing-gown and put on an old green coat of European cut that hung over a chair; the Czar silently permitted the change.

The Prince fetched a bowl of water and helped him bathe his face, a comb and smoothed out the tangled hair, performing these menial tasks with an unconscious joy in the doing of them and a tender love for the person whom he served that was touching to behold in one so stern featured and haughty as Danilovitch Mentchikoff.

Peter did not speak; he seemed in an apathy that chilled his faculties like the languor of a mortal illness; he suffered his friend to lead him from the house and showed neither dissent or assent.

It was now fading to the cool of the evening; the sky was translucent and almost colorless against the motionless forms of the trees that had not yet lost the freshness of early summer; the lake was placid beneath the borders of bright grasses and trails of wild flowers that flung themselves in lightly woven wreaths over the tiny wavelets that spent themselves against the banks.

In the distance a nightingale made the silence of the wood tremble with the intermittent rehearsal of his sharp, sweet song.

The two fine figures, the servant so splendid, the master so humble in attire, the King leaning on his minister with a sad and fatigued air, passed the little clearing round the house and through the first trees of the wood until they came to a spot where, through a break in the forest, was a view of low swamps and the distant sea which had the pale splendor of a tourmaline in the light of the sunset.

Peter sighed, with a long shiver of relief; his very

muscles seemed to relax; his was the panting satisfaction of one who is fevered, and, after much delay in heat and pain, finds a cup of cool fragrant water at his lips.

The air was of a keen freshness and ocean salt; it seemed to be wafted, pure and strong, from the distant shores of some dreamland beyond the verge of the pale confining sea; the perfect silence seemed charged with a sense of vitality, of the joy of life, of nature; the song of the hidden bird, that now and then sharply broke the stillness, was like a chant of calm triumph in the eternal majesty of nature's solitudes and untouched places; there was now no melancholy in this loneliness; a tender magic filled the marvelous hour of the twilight and something more than mortal was abroad in the gathering dusk.

The young Czar felt his lassitude fall from him; new energy shot through him like a flame touching his heart; once again all seemed possible; the grandeur of his manhood, the splendor of his rulership, again became palpable things; the nightmares fled leaving a sane world about him; the Swede no longer seemed a thing to so greatly fear or envy.

He was Czar of All the Russias, and a strong man in his youth.

With a laugh he pressed his friend's arm, and Mentchikoff laughed also, knowing his master cured for a while.

"Shall we trouble for that Northern boy, we who are Peter?" demanded the Czar, holding up his head and staring at the sea; he spoke thickly, for his tongue had swollen where he had bitten it, but the unhealthy pallor had left his face and his eyes had the calm of a healthy man.

"Come and have supper, now that your melancholy is over," said Mentchikoff, in a happy voice, "and I will show you a gay creature who will make you glad."

"Until it is dark I will stay under the trees," replied Peter, "and I shall not drink to-night."

CHAPTER III

WHEN the last glow of the sun had faded, the air of desolation, of vast gray spaces isolated from the world, returned.

The nightingale had ceased to sing and there was no other living creature abroad; the swamps beyond the wood were devoid of life, the night sky had the lead-colored look of the North, and there was no moon; there was no sense of summer now that the moon was gone.

Peter turned away; the sea being hidden from his view, he had no interest in the landscape; he moved slowly and with a ponderous step through the last trees of the woods, until he came to the chain of lilac thickets, now past their blooming, that led to Danilovitch Mentchikoff's house, Oranienbaum, a palace that he was erecting near to his master's cottage of Marli.

The night air refreshed the Czar; he was now perfectly sober and completely master of himself, but his spirit was plunged in a profound melancholy and his mental vision filled by the cold mighty figure of the young Scandinavian who had so suddenly crossed and blocked his path.

He felt no hatred towards this rival and no common envy, but a sad sense of his own failure beside the triumph of this heroic youth.

He had a long walk to the palace of Mentchikoff, which was situate almost at the mouth of the Neva, and on the opposite shore to where the fort of Cronstadt was being raised; but the exercise pleased him and he would not go to Marli for a horse, or a light,

or a servant, but strode alone through the gloomy dusk, without hat or cloak.

There was nothing new to Peter in this experience, though it was a remarkable one for the Czar of All the Russias; he had wandered through Europe alone, and poorly clad. When he reached the gardens that Mentchikoff was laying out, it was already completely dark, for the cold stars gave no glow, and Peter was guided only by the lights that shone through the open windows of the palace on to the parterres of brilliant flowers and the high hedges of clipped hornbeam; some one was playing the bailaika; the thin music sounded sadly in the empty gardens; Peter slowly went in at the principal entrance, the door of which stood wide.

The first floor of the palace was finished and furnished in a gorgeous style that was a mingling of the West and the East, of Europe and Russia.

The hall was hung with arras sent from France, and lit by Dutch lanterns that had come from the prows of ships.

The room that Peter entered had vermilion walls, vases of purple jasper on malachite stands, and Chinese furniture of ebony inlaid with ivory; on top of the great enamel stove was a beautiful ormolu clock which was not going; lengths of French silks and Eastern damasks covered the couches of which there were several, and a silver branched candlestick of Italian workmanship held seven candles that were the sole light of the room.

This stood on a long table of gray marble mounted in heavy gilt, which occupied the center of the apartment.

In one corner was an ornate black cabinet set with various colored stones, in another a beautiful Dutch bureau in oak; the tops of these were crowded with goblets, boxes, bottles, and trays of silver, gold, enamel, and glass, some heavily encrusted with precious stones. Near the window which was curtained with cut velvet

in orange and blue, hung an ikon, one mass of carved silver and rubies, and still hung with the Easter offerings of wreaths of wax fruit.

The air had been scented by the burning of pastilles, and a faint bluish smoke still obscured the atmosphere.

The whole effect was one of brilliant and crowded confusion, tasteless and barbaric; to Peter it was very splendid; a feeling of pleasure touched him that his favorite should have such a magnificent house.

"Danilovitch!" he called and went up to the table, and stood there, resting his hands on the gilt edge.

The twinkling notes of the bailaika stopped, and, from an inner door that Peter had not hitherto perceived, a woman entered carrying the little instrument.

They looked at each other across the candle light.

She was as tall as he, and beautiful, with a robust and splendid beauty; her carriage was magnificent; she wore a robe of crimson satin with an overdress of scarlet, stiff with gold embroidery, that reached the floor and stood out about her, only being open at the sides; a square plate of gold set with rubies shone at her breast, hung by rope on rope of twisted pearls her dark brown hair fell on her shoulders, from under the stiff Russian headdress of gold satin studded with turquoise, and to her feet behind, depended a long white gauze veil. Her fair, bold face, firm and beautiful in line and color, and sweet and pleasant in expression, was turned full towards the Czar.

He, in his worn green coat, disordered appointments, and tired bearing, was in a contrast almost sad with the room and the woman.

"You must be the Czar," she said; she put down the bailaika and came towards him, moving lightly on gold-shod feet.

"I am Peter Alexievitch," he replied, "and you?"

"My name is Marpha," she said simply. "I hardly know who I am."

"A Russian?" he asked, for her speech was strange, as if she used a tongue with which she was not familiar.

She shook her head.

"A Livonian, sire—a Lutheran—I do not know who my parents were," she added, anticipating his next questions, "nor why Prince Mentchikoff should bring me here."

"Why," said Peter, "you are the person he spoke of who could cure me of my melancholy."

She again shook her head.

"No, it could not be I—I am only a servant—in my best clothes"—she laughed gaily, glancing at her attire. "I have never been so fine before, but to-night Danilo-vitch Mentchikoff ordered me to dress so!"

The Czar was interested in her; she had an air of extraordinary vitality, of serene courage, and generous good-nature; she gave out an atmosphere of pleasant warmth and kindness, of enthusiasm and joy of life, more remarkable than her beauty; Mentchikoff's vivacity and high spirits had always been his greatest attraction for Peter, but this girl's calm happiness and aspect of radiant health were more potent than the favorite's gay humor in their effect on the Czar's somber mood.

"Why are you melancholy?" she asked, with a straight look from her large clear gray eyes. "The Czar of Holy Russia, and sad?"

Her glance seemed to have a certain pity for his marred and weary comeliness; it was as if she were the Empress and he the peasant, so splendid and composed was she, so shabby and downcast was Peter.

"I have something to make me sad, Marpha," he said.

"And many things to make you happy," she replied simply, "but you great men are never gay. There is supper to-night in the pavilion. Will you come and I will pour your wine?"

"No," said Peter, "I shall not drink to-night."

Remembrances of the cloudy horrors of the day darkened his face; he glanced round the gaudy room with the restlessness of a creature finding itself suddenly caged.

"I will go into the garden," he said; then abruptly, "You are a Livonian. Do you know anything of your King—Karl of Sweden?"

He paused in the open window, looking at her keenly, and ready to break into anger at whatever answer she might make.

But Marpha's simple sweetness was too strong for his suspicious anger; she defeated him by the sheer frankness of her reply.

"I know nothing of him," she said, "and what can he matter to such as the Czar of Holy Russia?"

Peter glanced at her, baffled; his vanity was soothed by this ignorant creature's perfect faith; his pride began to rise against this dread and envy of the threatening figure of the unknown young King.

"Yes, I am the Czar," he said sullenly, "and I can put a million men into the field for his every thousand, and if they are not as good soldiers I can knout them into being so."

With that he turned into the garden, and his tall figure was immediately lost in the darkness filled with the sound of the waving sumach boughs.

Marpha gazed thoughtfully at the open window; her hands that were white and smooth, but thick and strong, the hands of a peasant, played with her heavy jeweled breastplate.

Prince Mentchikoff entered from the hall where he had been waiting behind the open door.

"Has he gone?" he whispered.

"Into the garden," said Marpha.

"What do you think of him?" asked Mentchikoff eagerly.

"He is comely," replied the girl.

Mentchikoff laughed.

"He is the greatest man in the world."

"Ah, yes, the Czar of All the Russias."

"Not that only—he is a hero and a genius," said Mentchikoff, with passionate enthusiasm. "He is creating a new Russia."

"I understand none of these things," replied Marpha. "The world seems to me very well as it is—but I like Peter Alexievitch."

"Then—if you can—make him happy—keep him cheerful," said Mentchikoff; "in many ways his life is barren."

The girl looked at him with those clear eyes that were full of an almost startling sincerity and truth.

"Then you are tired of me, Danilovitch Mentchikoff, and wish to hand me to your master?"

He returned her look frankly; both were of the same class, one by talent, the other by beauty elevated to these surroundings of royal luxury; she had been little better than a camp follower and he was from the gutter; neither was disguised to the other by their present splendor and the pomp of their surroundings; both held their positions by the frail tenure of another person's favor—he by that of the Czar, she by his; for the powerful Prince was, after all, but a dependent on the favor of Peter, as the peasant girl was dependent on the caprice of Mentchikoff.

The two adventurers looked at each other keenly and there was a laugh between them; hers was wholly indifferent, perhaps heartless, his was gay and confident, for she cared for no creature but herself, nor ever would, while his least thought and meanest action was ennobled by his love for his master.

"I am not tired of you, Marpha," said Mentchikoff, "and never shall be. I think you are a wonderful woman. I think you might help the Czar where I fail—as now when he is in his melancholy—and when he is drunk, and when he is ill."

"I do not like sick people," said the Livonian slowly.

"You have enough health and vitality to be able to share it," replied Mentchikoff sharply.

She drew up her superb body that so proudly bore the heavy ornate trappings, and turning her beautiful head slowly, looked out into the darkness of the garden.

"We speak of the Czar of Holy Russia," added the Prince, with some offense at her indifference.

"We speak of a dangerous man," she replied, with that shrewdness that had already earned for her Mentchikoff's respect. "I do not wish to be raised up to be dashed down. He can be cruel, and he has all the power. Let me keep out of the way of Peter Alexievitch."

"You said that you liked him," said Mentchikoff sternly; he had been hoping more than he admitted to himself from this second influence on Peter, that was to have been like a doubling of his own.

"I like him, but I am afraid of him," she answered concisely. "He has many devils. I saw them peep out of his eyes. Keep me for yourself, Danilovitch Mentchikoff, for you are a peaceful man."

The Prince replied violently: "If you will not please Peter Alexievitch, you shall not please me"—and passing her roughly, followed his master out into the murmuring darkness of the garden.

Marpha colored, and her serene pleasant face was overcast.

She had been quite content with her lazy life of ease and admiration, which had been like Paradise after the hardships of her earlier years, and she was sorry that Mentchikoff, for whom she felt a placid affection, had put her in the Czar's path, for she was without ambition, fond of ease and comfort, and entirely uninterested in statecraft and politics; she could not write her own name, and was in every way entirely ignorant save in the natural arts of reading men and managing them; she would rather have been left in peace, and this though the dark sad face of Peter attracted her as she had never before been attracted.

With a little sigh she turned to her own apartment to take off the garment whose splendor rather con-

strained her, and put on the peasant costume that she usually wore.

In the pavilion Peter and Mentchikoff were discussing the coming campaign, the Czar showing a sudden fervent interest in those events that he had refused hitherto to even glance at; he would not drink, but turned half a glass of wine out on the table, and dipping his finger in it, proceeded to draw a rough map of the scene of the King of Sweden's operations on the green marble.

His knowledge of the country was accurate; he correctly placed Copenhagen, King Frederick at Tönning, Augustus of Saxony falling back before Riga and the victorious forces of Sweden.

Then he drew a swift line through Poland towards Narva.

"There he will fall on Russia, Danilovitch."

"Here we can meet him," replied Mentchikoff.

Peter frowned; his dark head with the full short curls was bent low over the stains of wine on the malachite table; carved wooden dishes with birds' heads, full of fruit, beakers of pierced steel and horn, had been pushed aside by the sweep of his right arm; the light of the candles fixed to the white walls of the pavilion shone on his stooping figure, and the harsh, earnest face and brilliant caftan of Mentchikoff.

Peter, staring at the smears of red on the green, was seeing those vast disputed provinces that he coveted, Ingermanland and Karelia ceded to Sweden nearly 100 years ago, Livonia and Esthonia lost by Poland to the same power in 1660; the possession of these lands would secure that Baltic port which had been the dream of Ivan IV, and which was so passionately desired by this first Czar who had beheld and loved the sea; the first ruler of Russia who had aspired to seize the trade with Asia and open up sea-going commerce. He had believed that the boy King of Sweden would be utterly incapable of defending his provinces, and that his secret league with Denmark and Poland would

be easily and successfully pursued to a victorious conclusion.

Now Denmark had fallen out of the fight and Poland was a wavering ally; but Peter still put some faith in Augustus, because of the trained Saxon soldiery.

So he remained for a while, staring at that crude map, his swift mind filled out with all detail; then he suddenly smeared the wine spillings together with his open hand and looked up at Mentchikoff, who was regarding him eagerly.

"This is a more difficult task than punishing the Strelitz or subduing the Cossacks," he said, with glittering eyes. "Surely it is more pleasure, Danilovitch, to overthrow free men than to put one's feet on the neck of serfs."

"The Cossacks will join Karl," remarked Mentchikoff, kindling eagerly at the Czar's fire.

"To-morrow we return to Moscow," said Peter, and his face was as fierce as it had been in the days after his return from his travels, when the streets of the capital had run red with the blood of the old Moscovite army, which had revolted against his foreign reforms.

He pushed back his tangled hair with his wine-stained hand.

"Send for that Livonian woman," he said, "she amuses me."

CHAPTER IV

PETER held his councils in the Kremlin surrounded by the pomp of the old world and the new; the reforms that he had introduced with so fierce and imperious a violence had not as yet greatly affected the nation, but the nobility who came directly under the influence of the Czar had been largely forced to adopt European ways, much as they might hate them and the men like Gordon and Lefort, who, mainly because they were foreigners, had so great an influence over Peter; these were both lately dead, but their inspiration remained. The Czar gathered his boyars together in the Golden Hall of the Sign Manual where his predecessors had sat on a silver throne under the gilded vaults, clad in robes stiff and blinding with jewels, and holding a rich orb as symbol of the universe they commanded; there Peter himself had sat in splendid pomp as a child with his idiot brother enthroned beside him. Peter was not magnificent to-day; in his plain green uniform and short hair he looked like a European foot soldier and utterly out of place in this great hall hung with scarlet, carpeted with Eastern tapestries, and decorated with jasper and silver, malachite and lacquer. The silver throne stood on a dais under a crimson canopy, and on the steps of it sat Peter, his hands clasped round his knees. The boyars had gone with their breastplates and caftans, robes, and caps, and there remained only the Duke of Croy, the German who commanded the army, and Mentchikoff.

All these were in the habit of Europe, Mentchikoff gorgeous in laced coat, star, cravat, and a flowing

French peruke which heavily framed his long, harsh face.

Peter, though affecting the most utter simplicity himself, liked to see those about him richly clad, and his favorites vied with each other in the splendor of their appointments; nothing pleased him more than to see the man who had worked beside him at the carpenter bench at Wapping and Zaandam, clad in workman's overall, appear in all the trappings of a French or English courtier. To-day he was in a good humor; the boyars had been compliant before his every command; his blood-thirsty vengeance on the reactionary party who had dared to raise a rebellion during his absence abroad was indeed too fresh in the minds of all for anyone to risk angering the terrible Czar.

"I will teach Russia the arts of war as I am teaching her the arts of peace," he remarked, looking at the Duke of Croy whom he admired as a tried soldier.

The German made a suitably loyal reply, but Mentchikoff broke in with a sharp remark.

"How many years do you think it will take you, Peter Alexievitch?"

"All my life," replied the Czar humbly.

"All your life," smiled Croy, "and not the meanest serf in All the Russias will thank you for your labors."

"What do you mean?" asked Peter.

Croy lifted his shoulders.

"Oh, go on with your wars and your politics and your reforms," he said cynically. "You are a strong man—but stronger is Holy Russia!"

Peter looked at him with a certain eagerness entirely devoid of anger; though he was so haughtily autocratic with his boyars he would take even insolence from these men whom he had put in the position of his masters; for a long while Croy and his like had represented European civilization to Peter.

But Mentchikoff resented on his master's behalf this speech made so sharply by the German.

"The Czar holds the Russias in the palm of his hand," he said haughtily.

"Oh, la, la!" cried the Duke.

Peter smiled grimly; he was thinking of the little chapel a few yards away, from the window of which his uncle had been hurled out on to the pikes of the soldiery below, and of his own boyhood of flight, and peril, and hiding; not far away in this same fierce fortress was the Red Staircase where Ivan the Terrible had stood to watch the cross-formed comet that had predicted his own ghastly end, that staircase where, one blood-stained June, Feodor Borisvitch, strangled by the sheltsi, had been flung down, this but in revenge for another murdered Czar; the history of his predecessors might indeed teach Peter that Holy Russia was not so easily governed or so rapidly subdued.

"The House of Romanoff has had its misfortunes but also its greatness," he said simply.

"And yet may give a lesson to the impertinent Swede," said Mentchikoff haughtily.

"He is a great soldier," added Croy, in his stern way.

The Czar's face darkened; he rose abruptly, his great height overtopping all of them.

"If he throws himself against Russia, he breaks himself," he remarked gloomily.

"He will attempt anything," said Croy; his imagination like that of most men of action had been fired by the figure of the Northern hero, who, like another Viking, had arisen to defend his country with so much majesty and cold magnanimity.

Peter did not care to hear his General praise his enemy.

"Where is Patkul; has he not returned?" he asked briefly. "He should have been here—I want news from Livonia."

No one knew where Patkul might be; it was not easy to travel in the vast kingdoms of the Czar, and a man might be late in obeying his sovereign's com-

mands, and his letters might be lost, for no other reason than the size of the country and the primitive confusions of all its services.

Peter would have liked the presence of the fiery Livonian, with his rage against Swedish tyranny and his hatred of Karl XI, who had condemned him to death for protesting against the wrongs of his countrymen, and his scorn for the present King as a haughty boy who would soon be tripped up in his giant's stride.

But Patkul, at present with Augustus of Saxony as ambassador of Russia, had not come nor answered the summons, and Peter knew very little of what was happening in any of the Baltic provinces; he saw them in his mind as a vast confusion, and felt impatient considering how much there was to be done and how inadequate his means were; his military plans had got no further than a proposed expedition to Esthonia, to seize, if possible, that province, and to send help to Augustus in Poland, or rather to effect a juncture with him, as Peter greatly relied on the trained Saxon troops and the polished diplomacy of the Elector; General Patkul should be with the Polish army, Peter knew, but since Dahlberg had worsted him at Riga, the Livonian's credit as a soldier had fallen in the Czar's eyes and he wished to consult with Augustus.

He was conscious of defects in his own statecraft; the Muscovite envoys whom he kept in Stockholm to swear friendly relations with Sweden had merely angered and disgusted the severe honor of the Northern King, and the Russian manifesto, in which the most puerile reasons were given for declaring war, had been better if never published; but so far no Czar of Russia had ever published any document concerning European diplomacy; in everything Peter trod new ground and was keenly conscious of his numerous mistakes.

"I will go to Poland," he said, his words following out his train of thought.

"You will have to defeat Sweden first, sire," replied Croy.

"Well," said Peter gloomily, "one can try. We march against Narva. The Swedes do not fear a winter campaign—since they are willing to fight amid the ice we must learn to do so also."

Saying these words with a certain simplicity, he abruptly left the chamber, and, passing through a maze of gilt and painted apartments, came out on the great terrace of the Kremlin that overlooks Moscow and the bridges over the Moskva.

He felt neither excited nor elated; perhaps he knew better than either Croy or Mentchikoff the difficulty of this, his first great enterprise, for, by the measure of his own wild heart he could judge of the greatness of his rival in glory; extraordinary himself, he found it easy to credit the extraordinary in others, and just as he was prepared to open war in the depth of winter, in a Polar climate, so he believed that Karl would be ready to meet him; nothing could prevent him from carrying out his ambitions, even if he had to perform feats that in the eyes of ordinary men were madnesses, and he rightly gauged his enemy's character to be the same in this respect.

He was glad that it was not possible to open the campaign till the winter, for he considered the added difficulty an added glory; with that sense of his own deficiency that was his truest greatness he did not intend to command his army himself, but to serve in it as a lieutenant, thereby giving the Russians a lesson in discipline and the value of training, for he was aware that his soldiers would consist of a horde of armed slaves and his officers of lawless nobles without experience or any capacity for warfare.

But here again his pride supported him; the more impossible the material, the greater the glory of creating for Russia an army that should out-rival those of Europe.

With a quiet step he walked the terrace of the fierce

old palace, half-fortress, half-monastery, filled with churches and tombs, treasures and chambers, haunted by the remembrances of cruelty and bitter passions, all old, half-decayed, half-vividly splendid, dirty, holy, secret, and foul.

Peter did not greatly care for this residence of his predecessors; he preferred the little cottage that he called Marli or any of the humble houses in the Dutch style that he had built since his return from Europe; the Kremlin oppressed him; there was something in the atmosphere that seemed to drag him back into the old ways of his ancestors here; his green uniform and his foreign friends could not disguise from himself his Tartar origin, his Asiatic breeding, which everything he touched reminded him of; neither did he love Moscow with that reverent love that he knew was in the heart of most Russians; he dreamt of that other city that was to spring out of the mudbanks of the Neva and rival Paris and London.

Pausing in his walk, he turned his soft and beautiful eyes over the prospect of the barbaric city which glittered in many brilliancies under the pale, greenish sky which was fading towards the evening hour; near by, beneath the battlements, was the river, full of reflected light, but void of color; beyond the plain was covered with crowded houses, a confusion of roofs of a dull brown hue above which rose the myriad cupolas and towers of the churches, shaped like strange fruits and decorated with fantastic designs in every color and shape, only alike in this, that each had the Christian cross surmounting the Tartar crescent, memorial of the time when the Asiatic hordes had possession of Russia and had changed the churches into mosques and of Ivan Vassilivitch who raised the symbol of Christ above that of the Infidel.

These crosses were all fastened by golden chains to the cupolas, and many were hung with discs, orbs, and stars that swung and glittered with every changing wind or shifting sunbeam.

Despite the splendor of the churches there was something dull, colorless, and melancholy about this prospect.

The Kremlin (a city in itself) was also gloomy; when Peter turned from looking over the city he could see, across the sandy, weed-grown courtyard, the whole of the citadel; the golden domes rising above walls disfigured and neglected, the three old cathedrals where the Czars were crowned, married, and buried, the great tower built by Boris Godunof, and behind all the red structure of the palace and fortress.

Peter was never pleased when his glance fell on these three churches that crowded round his royal residence; they reminded him too forcibly of the position assumed by the Church.

Peter meant to deprive the Patriarch of much of his power, and to vest in himself the religious as well as the temporal prerogatives of Aristocrat of All the Russias.

He began pacing up and down the terrace again, and presently took from the skirt pocket of his uniform a little letter which he read while the evening breeze fluttered it in his hand.

It was an appeal from his sister, miserably confined in the convent of Novo-Devichi, for a slightly better treatment; she was very ill, she said, having grown too stout and being covered with ulcers, and she begged for a little air and exercise.

Peter read the appeal with unmoved serenity; Sophia had inspired the late rebellion and could never be forgiven.

"A pity," thought Peter, "for she is clever and might have been useful to me."

He considered that he had been extremely generous in allowing her her life; the heads of her supporters still rotted on the battlements of Moscow; his wife, Eudoxia, suspected of favoring the rebels, was enclosed in a convent with a shaven head that last day of September, in the Krasnoi Ploshtshad, Peter had

executed with his own hand several of the wretched rebels already broken by torture, and had himself shaved the beards the nobility wore as a sign of their adherence to ancient custom; on the first day alone of the executions, two hundred persons had been ferociously put to death in the presence of their frantic wives and children; in the seven days' vengeance more than a thousand had perished; the bleeding members of the rebellious Strelitz had been nailed to the bars of Sophia's prison; every square in Moscow, every corner of the battlements of the Kremlin, had been hung with corpses.

And Sophia, who had been spared, ventured to complain of her prison!

The only effect of her letter was to make her brother resolve that if she gave any trouble during his present absence she should be strangled in the jail she found so irksome.

Tearing the paper into little pieces he cast it away, so that the fragments floated down the terrace and lodged in the broken pavement and the weed-filled terraces of the wall.

The sunset glow, pale and dim, but faintly tinged with a warm light, was now full on his smooth and rounded face with the large soft eyes and the loose curls; he looked younger than his years, an ardent boy; his thoughts had turned to his new adventure, the coming experiment of war.

He returned to his own chamber, not speaking to those whom he met on the way, walking softly through the gorgeous and dismal apartments of the Kremlin, with his hands locked behind the skirts of his coat and his head bent.

His room had a gold-domed ceiling and walls of sparkling mosaic, a holy picture set with precious stones between two pillars of gilt vermilion and Eastern carpets of silk on the floor, but the furniture was that of a camp, and the iron bedstead was covered only by the meanest blankets.

On a bright green cushion by the closed window sat Marpha, the Livonian peasant; she wore a plain white wool robe girdled with scarlet, and orange leather shoes; her head-dress had been removed and her bright opulent hair hung in heavy locks over her broad shoulders.

On the floor in front of her stood the crowns of the Russias, and she was playing with these in turn, like a child fondling toys, while on her lap was a bag of sweetmeats from which she fed herself continually, eating noisily and licking the sugar from her lips.

When the Czar entered she had in her left hand the plain gold crown of the Crimea, and before her the massive crowns of Astrakan, Kazan, Siberia, and Georgia, which pulsed with the light held and given forth by a thousand precious stones.

Peter looked at her with the eyes of love.

"Have you ever had such pretty playthings?" he asked.

Marpha glanced at him without either greed or envy in her expression.

"I would rather have an ivory comb," she said simply, and rose with the crowns in a half-circle at her feet.

"You shall have," answered Peter tenderly, "as many ivory combs as there are hairs in your head."

He crossed over to her and embraced her, resting his head, with a little sigh, on her bosom; she looked down at him calmly and with a certain indulgence.

"Marpha," he asked, "will you come to the war with me?"

"Still thinking of the war?" she replied gaily. "Have you had your supper? Will you eat here with me instead of with your boyars to-night? I have the kvas ready."

Peter lifted his head and looked at her; the atmosphere of the room was close and foul, the air full of flies and mosquitoes; both the room and the woman were dirty; her gown was soiled, her face and hands

sticky with perspiration and sugar; the taint of brandy was in her breath, and her expressionless beauty was clouded by her slovenliness. But the Czar saw none of these things; he felt as happy as he had ever felt in his life as he flung himself into one of the camp chairs, and she hastened to bring him his drink; the native spirit and fine French wine in equal parts.

He drank this, glass after glass, as the woman went into the inner room and prepared the rude supper, singing in a sweet voice and thinking of nothing much but the good, plentiful food and the fine, plentiful drink and the gay dresses and lazy days now within her reach.

And Peter, as he became inflamed with the spirit, imagined himself crushing the Swedes as he had crushed the rebellious Strelitz, and he nodded at the pale-faced ikon between the scarlet pillars, promising it an egg-shaped emerald when he should have taken Narva.

BOOK III

JOHN RHEINHOLD PATKUL

"His grief was but his grandeur in disguise
And discontent his immortality."

CHAPTER I

BY the first day of October, Peter, after ravaging Ingria, found himself before Narva, swiftly bearing the thunders of his vengeance against his Northern rival, who, despite the extreme severity of the climate (it was already midwinter in this bitter latitude), was steadily advancing to meet the last and most powerful of his enemies.

Peter was on fire to prove to the people, who were half unwillingly accepting his gigantic efforts to lift Russia into the position of a great power, that his new methods of warfare were capable of rendering null the treaties of Stolboro and Plivia, and Karl was equally resolute to prove that he was invincible in defense of what he had every right to consider his own territory.

John Rheinhold Patkul, the Livonian noble who had been largely instrumental in forming the threefold secret treaty against Sweden, who had been first in the service of the Elector of Saxony and afterwards Peter's envoy at Dresden, was now with the Muscovite army, and the report of his presence there further inflamed the cold anger of the King of Sweden, who, crossing the sea with a fine fleet of transport, was marching towards Narva six weeks after Peter had commenced the siege, regardless alike of the increasing rigors of the

winter and the disparity of numbers between his own army and that of the Czar.

He had reason for his confidence, for it was in numbers only that Peter had the advantage.

A skilled general with a disciplined army would have been able to reduce the little town of Narva into ashes in a few days, perhaps hours; Peter had sat down before it six weeks in vain, while the Baron de Horn, in command of the beleaguered garrison, was able, with his few pieces of cannon, to again and again level the trenches, redoubts, and fortifications that Peter had constructed round his camp, in accordance with what he had learnt in his travels.

These rude attempts at the science of war were complete failures; 150 cannon could scarcely be fired and could never hit their objective; nearly 65,000 men remained helpless before a garrison of 1000, in a small ill-protected town.

Peter, in no way sparing himself (he still held the rank of lieutenant in his own army), spent his days going from one part of his camp to another, instructing, working, exhorting, threatening, enduring all the hardships of the terrible weather and the inadequate supplies of the badly provisioned army.

The Duke of Croy was in command; an able soldier, trained in the traditions of European warfare, he yet was incapable of controlling an army consisting largely of a horde of peasants, dressed in skins, armed with scythes, pruning knives, and officered by a haughty and ignorant nobility, who knew neither how to enforce obedience nor how to submit to discipline.

There was not one good gunner in the whole army and no one who had seen a siege before; the only passable troops were the Strelitz, decimated by Peter's late vengeance on their reactionary spirit and only accustomed to Eastern and Asiatic methods of warfare.

Day after day Peter, dressed in the old green uniform, with a worn fur cap and mantle, smoking a Dutch clay pipe, watched, with a dogged patience, the erec-

tions of fortifications that Horn's artillery always accurately demolished; his brooding gaze traveled over his soldiers, courageous, robust, and willing, but completely ignorant and uncontrollable, and he thought of what he had yet to do for Russia.

Easier to build his city on the marshes of the Neva than to frame out of these an army that would defeat Karl of Sweden! He became melancholy and fierce; neither Mentchikoff nor Patkul nor Croy could divert his gloomy musings; the only creature who had any power to soothe him was Marpha, the Livonian peasant, whom he had brought with him and who bloomed like a winter rose amid the rough life of the camp; she enjoyed her surroundings, could give or take a rude jest with the least of the soldiery, wait on the Czar like a foot-boy, yet be a wild Aspasia to this strange Pericles.

The King of Sweden, with about 8000 men, of which the half were cavalry, landed at Pernau in the gulf of Riga; with all the horse and about half of the foot he advanced at once on Revel, without waiting for the rest of his troops.

Peter meanwhile had left the army before Narva in charge of the Duke of Croy, and had himself hastened to Pskov to bring up a new body of 30,000 troops; his design being to enclose Karl between two armies; he had already thrown across the road from Revel to Narva 55,000 men, including his best troops, the Strelitz, 5000 of which formed an advance guard, who soon found themselves facing the first regiments of the King of Sweden's army.

The Strelitz were so well posted among the rocks that a far fewer number than they possessed could have easily hindered the approach of a much larger army than that possessed by Karl, but the Russians, not knowing what they had to face and believing the Swedes innumerable as well as excellent, fled with little resistance. This panic communicated itself to their compatriots behind them, and in two days the Swedes had

swept before them 25,000 men, taken all the Russian outposts, and appeared before the Czar's entrenchments before Narva.

It was a black morning of dreadful cold, the last day of November, when Karl found himself before the army of Peter.

A gray sky hung heavily over the desolate landscape and seemed to press heavily on the bare trees; the Swedes were fatigued with the march from Pernau and the encounters with the Russians on the road; Karl called a halt.

A young Scotchman in his army, who had several times proved himself useful in delicate work of espionage, had managed to get ahead of the army and penetrate the Russian lines; the news he brought was considered interesting enough to cause him to be taken before the King.

He had never seen Karl XII face to face, and it was with considerable curiosity that he followed the staff officer who took him into the royal presence.

The army was taking a few hours' repose, but no tents had been set up, and the Scotchman found Karl seated on the great roots of a huge pine tree, with him Count Piper and several generals.

He was already completely inured to hardships for which his childish training had well fitted him, and suffered from the severities of warfare perhaps less than any of his soldiers.

He was now only a few months past his eighteenth birthday, but in every respect had reached his full development; his great height and powerful figure made him conspicuous even among an army of robust and vigorous men; he had the grace of the athlete and the dignity of a king in his carriage, yet there was an awkwardness, a stiffness in his manners that might have been haughtiness or indifference or even shyness; his expression was cold and unchanging, his speech abrupt and plain; he gave no impression of youth save in the softness of his traits and the slackness of his figure.

He wore a blue uniform, tight waisted and with a full skirt, closely fastened with buttons of gilt leather up to the throat and showing no shirt, but only the plain band of the black satin cravat; an ordinary leather belt and strap supported his sword, and long gauntlet gloves reached to his elbow, his soft knee boots and his breeches were alike of leather; he wore a three-cornered black hat set well on his head, and his fair hair arranged in curls like a peruke on his shoulders.

He had a mantle of blue cloth, lined with fur, but this, despite the freezing cold, was cast on the ground beside him; his face, yet beardless and showing, notwithstanding the exposure to intemperate weather, still the bloom of extreme youth, had hardened in outline since he had begun the life of a soldier; the features were firm as a mask of stone, fresh with the warm tints of health, generous and full in line and curve; neither enthusiasm nor humor, nor pride, nor tenderness showed in his expression; his blue eyes looked out with a cold, level, and serene glance; he had the air of one dwelling in a world of his own with little care for others.

The Scotchman thought him remarkable but neither agreeable nor attractive; the King had a personality too aloof from warm and human weaknesses to command sympathy from ordinary men; he had many servants but few friends, much admiration, but little love.

"Tell me," he said at once, as the young man was presented to him, "did you see the Czar of Muscovy?"

The Scotchman saw that the King attached much importance to this question, and was chagrined that he could not answer in the affirmative.

"Sire, the Czar has left his army to hasten up the reserves."

"I should like to have met him in the battle," said Karl, but without a trace of annoyance. "The

reserves could have come up without him. I think he did ill to leave his post now."

"It looks," said one of the generals who stood beside the King, "as if he was afraid of your Majesty."

"That is impossible," replied Karl quietly, "for I take him to be a great man."

"But it is true, sire," put in the Scot, "that the Muscovites have a great terror of your Majesty; I was in their camp last night and heard them speak of you and your exploits as they might have spoken of supernatural things."

"It needs but a poor prowess to achieve a reputation in the eyes of savages," replied the King, still cold and unmoved. "These Russians are both ignorant and wild. How came you, sir, to escape detection?"

"I speak the German very well, sire, and passed for the servant of a German officer, of whom they have several, and their camp is in such a confusion one might almost come and go as one pleases."

"They know nothing of war," observed Karl, "but the Czar will teach them."

"He seems much loved—though unjustly cruel and unwisely generous. I saw his friend, Mentchikoff, and the Livonian woman who they say has a great influence over him."

Karl smiled, as if he was glad to hear of this weakness in his rival; there was not a woman in the whole of the Swedish army; the Scot remarked how disagreeable his smile was; it seemed to disfigure his noble face.

"Saw you this woman?" he asked.

"Yes, sire, at the door of Peter's empty tent, making kvas, as they call the stuff they drink. She had a fur coat of uncouth cut and was all smeared with meal and honey, but in her way she is as beautiful as Aurora von Königsmarck."

The King abruptly changed the subject as if he

regretted having shown even so much interest in the affairs of his enemy.

"You learnt nothing of importance?" he asked with great indifference; he had only spoken to the spy because he wished to know if Peter was with his army; as to his own actions, he had decided what they were to be ever since he had landed at Pernau.

The Scotchman proceeded to tell him of what he had learnt of the enemy, their number, disposition, and probable plans.

Karl listened with patience, but with so cold a mien that the young man faltered in his speech; the King's face, blank as it was of all but courageous steadfastness, overawed him and made him uneasy; he felt that he spoke to one utterly beyond his knowledge or liking; he was glad when he was dismissed.

As he went Karl rose from the tree roots, overtopping, by nearly half a head, his tallest officer; the air was still and freezing, and a few flakes of ghastly white snow began to flutter from the bitter sky.

"We should be able to attack at midday," said the King; it was then about ten o'clock.

"Your Majesty has considered the peril?" asked General Rehnsköld. "By all accounts we must be outnumbered by a hundred to one, and they are entrenched and fortified."

Karl stooped and took up his mantle, shaking from it the first flakes of snow that were large and hard.

"Do you doubt, he answered, "that I, with 8000 Swedes, can pass over the bodies of 80,000 Muscovites?"

He swung the mantle round his great shoulders and then added instantly, fearful that he had seemed to boast, a thing his pride loathed: "Are you not really of my opinion, Rehnsköld? I have two great advantages—he cannot use his cavalry, and as the ground is enclosed his great numbers will be but an encumbrance. It is I who am really stronger than he, and have all the advantages."

General Rehnsköld bowed his head in assent; there was not one of the staff officers behind him who did not consider the young King's action rash to madness.

Karl saw this; for their opinion he cared nothing; but he greatly disliked to be suspected of bravado; his was not the unconscious modesty of a man who knows not he is great nor that his actions are remarkable, but the conscious austerity of one who is aware he is extraordinary and wishes to be acclaimed, but not by his own tongue.

"If I defeat the Czar here, Cracow and Varsovia are open to me," he said, turning his blue eyes on the quiet faces of his officers.

Again General Rehnsköld bowed.

"I am entirely of your Majesty's opinion."

"At least you submit very gracefully, General," replied Karl, with his ugly smile.

He turned away and Count Piper followed him.

"He will be as hard and obstinate as his father," remarked an officer, shivering under his fur, for the cold was of Polar intensity.

"Eight thousand men against eighty thousand!" exclaimed another. "He thinks to rival Leonidas or one of his saga heroes."

"Gentlemen," said Rehnsköld, "I think he will do it."

The King and Count Piper mounted and cantered along the lines of the resting army; Karl had taken no deliberations and held no councils. He considered that there was nothing to do but to give the order to attack; after a brief survey of his men he would be back with his staff under the great pine.

Count Piper, who was not a soldier but a true patriot, glanced several times at what the black hat and full fair curls allowed him to see of the King's face.

He had been very eager to urge him into a defensive war, but he had never dreamed of these reckless projects, this complete absorption in war for war's sake;

he secretly suspected that all the cold but deep passion of the King's nature was concentrated, not on the desire to better Sweden, but on the design of making for himself the reputation of an invincible captain; the main object of the war was achieved in the restoration of the Duke of Holstein-Gottorp to his dominions; but Karl had never said a word of returning to Stockholm, even for a visit, and the last advices from the Council of Regency in the capital he had thrust in his pocket without reading, and he had embarked on this desperate winter campaign, with no purpose that Count Piper could see but that of making the world stare.

"As long as these mad exploits are successful——" thought the statesman, "but his first failure will cost us all Gustavas Vasa gained!" He could not resist the endeavor to rouse Karl from his passive hardness.

"When your Majesty has beaten the Czar of Muscovy, will you be content?"

"There is still Augustus," replied the King; he glanced up at the snow-filled air. "Look, the storm is blowing towards the enemy, we shall have it at our backs, they in their eyes—did I not say I was fortunate?"

Count Piper shivered; the weather was black and bitter enough to freeze a man's soul; he wished Karl's ardor for glory had stopped short of battle in mid-winter at a latitude of 30 degrees Polar, with odds of a hundred to one.

"You are cold?" asked Karl. "I like the snow. I wish Peter was with his men. Surely he will return from Pskov."

His blue eyes cast a bright glance over the precise ranks of his perfectly disciplined soldiers; men who had prayers twice a day and lived like athletes in training.

"I had an item of news from Stockholm when last I heard," said the Count, as they turned their horses'

heads. "Viktor Falkenberg is dead. It seems that she had long concealed a fatal complaint."

The King's expressionless face did not alter; he was skilfully guiding his horse over the rough ground, already white with snow.

"The signal for the charge," he remarked, "will be two shots—the passwords—'God with us.'"

A darkness enclosed the world with the soft descent of the snow; the flakes hung in the folds of the King's mantle and in his curls; his hat was covered; the ground was frozen, the tops of the gaunt pines hidden in the whirling storm; the rigid ranks of Sweden showed a darkness amid the dark; facing them were the black gaping cannon of the vast army of the Czar; even beneath their fur caftans the Russians were numb; Marpha, wrapped in skins and wools, stared at a picture of St. Nicholas Mentchikoff had thrust into her hands, but she was not praying but thinking of the absent Czar; she wished he was back in the dirty tent where she could minister to him and prepare him for the fight.

"I wonder if he is afraid of that boy?" she thought, then suddenly crouched low as the sound of the Swedish cannon scattered the storm; Karl and his eight thousand were hurling themselves on the ranks of Muscovy; Marpha crept to the tent door and looked out, but the snow swirled in and blinded her; again the cannon and distant shouts; she sat huddled and silent, hating her lover for not being there.

CHAPTER II

IF you do not believe that I shall redeem Narva you are a fool," said Peter rudely. "The Swedes themselves will teach us how to defeat their own armies."

It was three months after his bitter failure when the King of Sweden had scattered his immense forces in a few hours, and he himself, coming with the reinforcements from Pskov, had withdrawn from the path of a conqueror with troops so greatly inferior to his own; Karl was spending the winter encamped near Narva and Peter had come to Birsén, a little town in Lithuania, to meet informally (indeed it might be said that the Czar never did anything formally) his ally, Augustus, Elector of Saxony and King of Poland, on whose trained troops Peter still relied, though Augustus had shown to but little advantage in the war, and had done nothing since he had gracefully submitted to necessity in raising the siege of Riga.

It was to Augustus whom Peter spoke now; the King Elector's heart was hardly in the war that for him had been mainly an excuse to keep a standing army with which to overawe Poland, and that he had never intended to go to these extreme, expensive lengths, and he had several times referred, with that calm elegance that irritated Peter, to the disastrous day of Narva, so fatal to the Russian arms that the terrified inhabitants of Moscow, on hearing of the news, had not hesitated to attribute it to magic on the part of the Swedes. And Peter had suddenly broken out into violence.

"Perhaps you are a fool," he added loudly.

Augustus flushed, but smiled and slightly raised his

eyebrows, glancing at the third occupant of the chamber which was the best parlor of the best house in Birsén. This gentleman was John Rheinhold Patkul, the prime author of the league against Sweden, at first in the employment of Saxony, now in the service of Peter whom he continued to represent at Dresden.

He looked at the Czar now with a glance of affection and spoke quietly.

"I am sure that your Majesty will completely revenge Narva."

"Thank you, General Patkul," said Peter sullenly, "but whatever you or any other man believe, I am sure I shall humble that haughty boy."

He put his elbows on the corner of the black oak table near which he sat and supported his face in his brown hands.

The persons of these three men were in great contrast, and it was plain that some extraordinary event outside their own volition or inclination had brought them together. Peter wore his shabby green uniform, cracked and old top-boots, a sword and belt like those of a common soldier, his own tumbled short and dusky curls, only his linen was fine and clean where it showed above the high buttoned coat; for the rest he might have been a trooper, disordered after a day's march.

Augustus, who sat in a great chair with arms near the log fire, was a man of a physical strength famous throughout Europe; he was as tall as the Czar and far more powerfully made, the splendid Karl would have appeared a stripling beside him for he was now in the prime of his manhood; a magnificent prince like the hero of a fairy-tale to the eye, for he was extremely good-looking in a pleasing, conventional fashion, gracious, easy in manner, full of fire and chivalry, and elegant as any courtier of Louis XIV; his court was considered next to that of Versailles for brilliancy, extravagance, and elegance, and he had made Dresden nearly as fashionable as Paris.

He also wore riding costume, but in complete con-

trast to the habiliments of the Czar; a mantle of dark blue silk, lined with black fur, was flung back on his shoulders and fastened across the breast with gold clasps; his coat was of fine deep crimson cloth gallooned with silver; his rich laces, fastened with a black bow at the throat, fell over a white satin waistcoat heavily embroidered in colored silks; his close knee-boots were of the softest leather, his spurs gilt, his sword and baldrick very handsome and tasseled; his kindly, charming face was framed in the rich curls of a long peruke, and on the chair beside him were his huge gauntlet gloves, his black hat with long white plumes and his gold-headed riding-crop.

He looked both disinterested and slightly ill at ease, though his air was one of perfect courtesy, and he seemed to pay more attention to the Livonian nobleman than to the Muscovite Czar—finding the former more to his ideas of civilization.

This man, who had already played such a considerable but more or less secret part in the politics of Northern Europe, and who now defied Karl XII with his sword as he had defied Karl XI with his eloquence, was still young, but of an appearance ordinary compared to that of the two princes.

He was fair, of medium height, with blunt features and earnest gray eyes, an expression enthusiastic and serious; he wore the uniform of a Saxon General, and his peruke was tied with a black ribbon; his personality was sincere and attractive, and to any who knew his history there was round him the fascination of lost causes and forlorn hopes, the romance of the fanatic and the patriot, for Patkul had only lived with the one object of rescuing his country from the tyranny of Sweden.

He had been elected as spokesman to put the wrongs of Livonia before Karl XI; that stern monarch had received him graciously.

"You have spoken for your country like a brave man, and I respect you for it," he had said, but the

next day Patkul had been arrested on a charge of treason; he had broken prison and escaped abroad, and from then had been the steady enemy of Karl XI and his son.

To Augustus he had been of infinite value, and he had only left the court of Dresden because his single-mindedness, his haughty spirit, and ardent purpose had accorded ill with the frivolous atmosphere, bed-chamber plots, and petty intrigues of the Elector's court; in Peter he had found a more congenial master, but a sentimental tie still bound him to Dresden; he was betrothed to a good and beautiful Saxon lady, Mde. D'Einsiedel.

The sincerity and simplicity of this love affair was in contrast to the fashion of the moment; Augustus was slightly cynical and Peter did not understand, but Patkul was not greatly concerned in these princes' opinion of his private concern; they were to him but instruments to free Livonia and humble Sweden, though for Peter Alexis he felt a certain affection, for the Czar was also struggling with a gigantic, perhaps hopeless, task.

Augustus glanced with some disgust at the somber figure of Peter; the moods and melancholies of the wild, diseased Muscovite were very repellent to the healthy, ease-loving Saxon; secretly he cursed the alliance with Russia (though he was too good-natured to blame its author, Patkul), and wished that he had found some less dangerous excuse for keeping his standing army.

However, he had to force on his reluctant and somewhat lazy mind that he was in a perilous position; Karl had defeated Denmark (who no longer counted as a member of the league) and defeated Russia, and there could be little doubt that the stern and haughty young conqueror would now turn his arms against Poland; the King-Elector saw no ally and no chance of support save in the Czar.

The treaty of Altona kept England and Holland

tacitly at least on the side of Sweden, and Augustus had never been looked upon well by France, whose princes he had defeated in the candidature for the Polish throne.

His defensive measures must be taken in concert with Peter; a defeated man, certainly, but one of immense resources and genius.

"While we talk, Sweden will act," he said, with a slightly quizzical smile, his good humor after all carrying the day in the struggle with his irritation against the mood of the incomprehensible Peter; he rose, very gorgeous and making the room look mean. "Let us have our dinner," he added, "and then come to some serious conversation."

"Which has been too long delayed, sire," remarked General Patkul quietly; already the meeting between kings and ministers was several days old, and nothing had taken place but mutual compliments and mutual entertainments in which all had joined from Peter and Augustus to the meanest secretary in their train; Patkul, the only man who had kept quite aloof, was probably the only man in Birsen now completely sober; it was the reaction from debauch that had plunged Peter into melancholy, and Augustus was heavy-headed and heavy-eyed.

"Too long delayed," he agreed smoothly. "Karl will not spend much longer before Narva—why, having achieved his end, he cannot go home——"

Peter looked up.

"Achieved his end?" he questioned.

"Has he not got back Holstein-Gottorp and checked the invasion into his Baltic provinces?"

"And you think that was his end!" exclaimed the Czar contemptuously. "No, he wishes to dethrone you and me."

Augustus laughed at this abrupt statement.

"A second Alexander? Not in these times, sire," he replied. "Not even a vain boy would dream of world conquest now—especially after the lessons of

Ryswick; what Louis could not accomplish Karl will hardly attempt."

"I think that he will," said Peter, measuring the Swede's spirit by his own.

He was seconded by the Livonian.

"I think that you are right, sire; there is no end to what Karl will attempt—perhaps no end to what he will achieve. I think his Saxon Majesty can hardly conceive the type, hard, cold, justly cruel and justly generous—a man without mercy for himself or others, austere, awkward, without grace or charm, yet underneath half-mad with pride, with obstinacy, with the old Viking blood lust, the old Berserker fury against those who oppose him."

Patkul spoke with a feeling that pleased Peter, always intensely interested in anything to do with his rival.

"He is reputed virtuous," said the Czar.

"Virtuous!" exclaimed Patkul, with a flush in his blond face. "Yes—he has prayers twice a day in his camp, and his soldiers do not take a slice of bread that they do not pay for; he lives the life of a Spartan and a monk, for it is his vanity to be considered above the weaknesses of mankind, but he would see Sweden go to perdition sooner than forgo one of his mad schemes or sacrifice one leaf from the laurels of his barren victories!"

"You speak from your knowledge of his father," said Augustus.

"From my knowledge of the race, sir. Karl XI thought something of the good of his people, and embarked on no useless conquests, but the type was the same—a man of granite. He killed his Queen with his hardness. I think that he never said a kind word, all his days, to anyone."

"And no woman was ever found to soften him?" asked Augustus, who was trained in the traditions of Versailles.

"Never. They say that this man is the same," re-

plied Patkul. "He prefers to govern his passions rather than to risk female domination and has resolved never to look on a fair face."

"I will send him Marpha," said Peter gravely. "She would twine round the heart of a saint."

At the thought of such an ambassadress being sent to bewitch the haughty young conqueror with her crude charms, and the spectacle of the Czar's entire belief in the illiterate camp follower with her rude speech and neglected person who so offended the fastidious taste of the Saxon, Augustus could not repress a smile of contempt.

Peter perceived it and rose; little flames of wrath sparkled in his full brown eyes.

"Well, send him Aurora von Königsmarck," he cried violently.

Augustus was utterly taken aback; he had never so been spoken to nor surrounded by other than refinement and elegance; to even hear the name of Aurora on the lips of Peter was a profanation, but to listen to her, one of the admired women of Europe, the Montespan of his Versailles, coupled, in this odious connection, with the Livonian peasant, raised by the mad caprice of Peter, made him put his hand to his sword.

"Well," said the Czar, with dangerous softness, "why not your woman as well as mine?"

Patkul intervened.

"Leave the names of women, sire," he said quickly and with some authority. "The King of Sweden is not, in any case, to be outwitted that way."

Augustus recovered his composure by reminding himself that he had to deal with a man almost wholly a savage.

"At least you will leave the name of the Countess von Königsmarck, sir," he said coldly.

Peter laughed with rude contempt; he had no respect for any woman, and the brilliant Aurora who ruled the superb court of Dresden was no better in

his mind than Marpha, who stirred the kvas and drank brandy in his dirty hut or tent.

Augustus did not like this laugh and spoke again, to avoid a quarrel.

"Surely it is time we joined Mentchikoff for dinner," and he glanced patiently at the cold winter day beyond the window.

"You are very fond of your dinner," said Peter, who turned from the French cooking provided by Augustus to devour half-cooked greasy meat and parboiled vegetables soaked in vinegar.

The King-Elector, perfectly master of himself, turned easily to Patkul.

"General," he said, "escort His Majesty to the dining-hall."

And with that he left the room, gathering up gracefully his hat, gloves, and whip.

"He is a silly fribble and a besotted rake," said Peter angrily, as the door closed.

"He has a fine army, sire," replied Patkul quietly; he was used to managing both these men, so utterly different and both so necessary to his great schemes.

"Yes," admitted the Czar sullenly, with envy in his eyes.

"The sort of army that is needful to defeat Sweden—come here, sire," he beckoned Peter to the window and pointed out, in the courtyard of the modest house, the Saxon guard who had been appointed to attend on Peter during his residence at Birsen. "Are they not splendid fellows? And those passing, of the Brandenburg regiment—and Augustus has thousands of such men."

Peter's haggard eyes lit with professional enthusiasm.

"I will have men like that, Patkul."

"Meanwhile it is useful to tolerate the Elector, sire."

"And choke myself with his French sauces, and grimace with him over his compliments."

"Well," said Patkul gravely, "I think your Majesties have some tastes in common; you have been drunk

together for three days on end, and that should have promoted some fellow-feeling."

The Czar gave no answer and Prince Mentchikoff entered the room; he was dressed magnificently, and in tolerable imitation of the Saxon nobility; the peasant had acquired Western polish more easily than the Czar.

Peter greeted him affectionately, taking his face between his hands and kissing him; it was the first time he had seen him that day for Mentchikoff had been sleeping off the effects of last night's orgy.

Patkul left the two Russians together, and hastened after Augustus who was already seated at table with several of his ministers and officers.

"You wish yourself back at Dresden, no?" he greeted the Livonian pleasantly.

"Sire," replied Patkul, "I should not care to be back at Dresden thinking that this meeting had been fruitless."

"You are right," said Augustus, gravely, "and the sooner we finish this treaty the sooner we can return," and his eyes shone, as he thought of his Aurora.

Patkul completed the treaty that day; the Czar was to send into Poland 50,000 men to learn to become soldiers, and, in the space of two years, to pay to the Czar 3,000,000 rix-dollars; Augustus was to levy from neighboring princes 50,000 trained German troops to send into Russia; this treaty, that seemed to lay the foundation for the greatness of the Czar and the ruin of Sweden, once completed, Patkul would have made instant preparations to put it into force; but Augustus, despite the attractions of his gorgeous darling and his fears for the safety of his kingdom, joined Peter in a week-long debauch.

Meanwhile Sweden, breaking camp at Narva, marched on Riga, and Patkul, unable to endure the idle orgies, obtained permission to join the Saxon troops under Courlande and Steinau, who were defending the passage of the Dwina against the conqueror.

CHAPTER III

WHEN things go smoothly it is well to be a woman, when they go ill I would give my soul to be a man," said Aurora von Königsmarck.

She was in her beautiful chamber in the Palace at Dresden, seated on a low couch piled with cushions of shimmering brocade, holding in her long fair hand a letter from the Elector.

"I think," replied her companion, "you would not, under any inducement, be other than what you are."

Aurora looked up sharply.

"Would you?" she demanded.

The court favorite smiled as she spoke and flung herself farther back into the soft cushions, crushing the stiff violet ribbons and frills of silver lace on her magnificent gown.

"No," said the other lady; she was fair and pale, and seated on a stool of red lacquer was helping a tiny negro page to feed with sugar a parrot that swung in an ebony ring.

"Why?" asked Aurora.

"Because I am betrothed to General Patkul," replied the lady, without looking round.

"Romantic love—in this age!" smiled the Countess.

Mdle. D'Einsiedel daintily placed the morsel of sugar in the bird's huge polished beak; he as daintily accepted it, and twisted round in his ring sweeping his long green tail feathers into the face of the page.

"Tell me about it," coaxed Aurora, leaning forward so that her beautiful head peered over the gilt edge of the settee. "Tell me what it is like to be in love—in love!—in that way?"

"I am sorry for you that you do not know, Countess," smiled Hélène D'Einsiedel, still amusing herself with the bird and not looking round.

Aurora von Königsmarck studied her with a curiosity that was not entirely without malice and envy.

The young girl (she was hardly more than seventeen) made a beautiful picture in her full rose-colored dress, seated on rose-colored cushions, with rainbow-hued silk ribbons at her slender waist, and in her loosely dressed pale hair, silk flowers; forget-me-nots and roses were amid the fine laces on her open bosom, pearls in her ears and round her throat; her delicate features shone fair with youth and health, grace and breed; she was wealthy, noble, nurtured in a corrupt and brilliant court, and she had consented to bestow her hand on a man who was no more than a political adventurer; native of a country supposed half-savage and with no particular attractions of person or manner, John Rheinhold Patkul had never been popular with the courtiers of Augustus, but he had inspired this girl with an intense devotion that no opposition could shake.

She continued with undisturbed grace to feed the parrot; behind her was a tapestry of a woodland scene, gray-green in color, which formed the background to her pale beauty which was in piquant contrast to the negro with his scarlet suit and sky-blue turban and the harsh colors of the bird.

"Well, child," said Aurora at length, "if you will not talk——! You will marry your Livonian, and go to live in his wild country and forget about me."

The girl looked at the sugar lying in her pink palm; Aurora had always been her friend, to some extent her patroness, but she did not care to talk to her of General Patkul.

"Obstinate!" continued the Countess. "You will not even distract me from my bad news. Augustus is sick. And the fight by Riga goes ill for us."

"Ah!" Mde. D'Einsiedel turned her brown eyes now.

"I thought I should move you," remarked Aurora maliciously. "Have you not heard, then, from your idol?"

Patkul, with Courlande and Steinau, was disputing the sandy reaches of the Dwina against the advancing troops of Karl XII; it was the first shock of the opening of the young conqueror's second campaign.

"I have not heard for several days," replied the girl in a low voice, "but why should I grieve or trouble? The cause is a sacred one, and I feel sure that God will protect it."

Aurora smiled at these trite words which betrayed the touching confidence of youth in the continuance of happiness; she saw that the girl was so wrapt in the splendor of a first and noble passion that she could not think of misfortune as a possible thing. The Countess sighed and pulled at her waist ribbons with restless fingers; all romance had long left her life; her outlook was that of the brilliant adventuress concerned only to keep the splendid position she had attained by talent and beauty.

By now she had forgotten if she ever had loved Augustus, the handsome, generous, good-humored Prince whose favor had made her great; he was simply her world, the thing by which she must stand or fall; his ruin would be her ruin, utterly; she was grateful enough and loyal enough to scorn the thought of leaving him if he was defeated and brought to disaster, but she could not view with calm the prospect of losing her position as mistress of the second most brilliant court in Europe, and all the pleasures and honors she now enjoyed as a famous beauty and a clever and powerful woman. She was of a noble Swedish family with a wild and tragic history; the names of her two brothers had long held a horrid renown; Philip von Königsmarck had been the lover of Dorothea of Zell, the Elector of Hanover's wife, and, betrayed by a woman's jealousy, had been caught and horribly murdered as he left the Electress; the other

brother had been concerned in the brutal assassination of a wealthy Englishman whose wife the young adventurer hoped to marry; his accomplices were taken and hanged and he had fled, to perish miserably and obscurely in battle.

These tragedies had not been without their effect on Aurora; she found the echo of them in her own wild heart; she had wept with passionate indignation for Philip and scorned the other for a fool.

As for herself she meant to be neither the victim of passion nor of folly, but in every way to avoid disaster; her impetuous spirit was governed by a cool brain; she was intelligent in large matters, clever in small ones, intensely conscious of being an extraordinary woman, not vain of her beauty nor her wit nor her charm, but aware of the value of these things, how men could be led by them, and the power they might purchase.

She had no evil qualities; her most sincere emotion was her passionate love for her beautiful little son, Maurice; perhaps a sense of stifled discontent lay deep hidden in her heart, mingled with the adventurer's secret longing for haven and security; this she never admitted even to herself, but sometimes it colored her behavior, as now when she was inclined to be spiteful with the young and rather silly girl absorbed in the magic of a great love.

"She really would leave everything for him," thought the Countess; she wondered what it must be to feel like that; the creature was so shy and reserved about it too.

Aurora had herself, purely as a matter of course, tried to bring Patkul to her feet when he had first come to the Dresden Court; neither her fidelity to Augustus nor the native coldness of her disposition prevented her from endeavoring to subjugate every notable man who crossed her path; that the Livonian had been ice to her and flame to Hélène D'Einsiedel did not add to the good-humor with which she viewed this romantic, old-fashioned love affair.

Vanity apart, her good sense condemned the type of man who could prefer a stupid girl, endowed only with the passing prettiness of youth, to a woman like herself.

She was extremely lovely, vivid in coloring for the North, bright brown eyes, soft brown hair, graceful from crown to heel, every movement charming, every look and gesture radiant with beauty.

"Why are you angry with me, Countess?" asked the girl suddenly, tossing down the sugar on to the rose-colored cushions.

"How did you know I was angry?"

"Oh, la, you look as if you would like to beat me!"

Aurora suddenly moved and clasped her long hands round her knees.

"I suppose I envied you," she said, in one of her careless generous impulses. "You have something I have never had."

Hélène did not quite understand.

"Little silly!" laughed Aurora. "Do you not know that I am incapable of loving any man as you love your Patkul?"

"You pretend very well," said Hélène, with a demureness that might have hid a touch of malice.

Aurora was silent; yes, she could pretend very well, she had often marveled at that herself, often been genuinely amazed at the strength and sincerity of the emotion she could raise in others and her own lack of response; she would have liked to have felt, if only for half an hour, any adoration for any man equal to that this girl felt for General Patkul; she knew that such an emotion would have been entirely in opposition with all her plans and schemes, but in her avid desire for life and knowledge, she would have given much for the curiosity of the experience.

However, she put the thought out of her mind, moved quickly, and glanced again at the letter from Augustus.

She was vexed that he was too ill to take the com-

mand of his armies in person, the more so as she guessed this illness to be consequent on his debauches with the Czar at Birsén; Peter to her was a monster, she could not forgive in Augustus the weakness that made him the companion of his ally's vulgar orgies.

"Yes, 'twere better to be a man now, free on horseback," she said. "This waiting amid one's toys is an ugly part of a woman's life"—she paused, then added quickly, "it must be hateful to belong to a man who is defeated."

Hélène gazed at her with startled eyes.

"You do not think that Saxony will be defeated, Countess?"

"He has been defeated already," replied Aurora. "And do you think he has very much chance? The savage Muscovite is no use—every battle will be a Narva for him. Denmark is silenced—and the King of Sweder is great."

Mdle. D'Einsiedel forgot her negro and her parrot.

"He is a cruel tyrant—a bitter oppressor!" she exclaimed; her pale little face looked sharp with anger, "he fights for the lust of conquest—a heartless, fierce man."

"So speaks the betrothed of Patkul," answered Aurora. "You are too bitter against this man to judge him. He is a hero. And young and splendid, a Viking, child."

"This is not the age for Vikings," said Hélène coldly, "he is like his father. Patkul has told me of them—hard and cruel—how I *loathe* cruelty."

Tears shone in her soft eyes and her lips quivered; she was thinking that it was just possible Patkul might one day be in the power of this same cruelty.

"Nay, he is just and even generous; you heard how, after Narva, he gave all the Russian officers their liberty, detaining only M. de Croy, to whom he paid full honor—and the modesty of his dispatches! 'Tis said that with his own hand he struck out his praises and put in those of the Czar."

"'Tis his vanity," said H       scornfully, "he wishes to impress the world—see if he is kind to his peasants—to his women-folk—see if he has ever thought of the justice of Livonia's wish for liberty—he blindly continues his father's tyrannies."

Aurora checked her with a light laugh.

"That is none of it women's business. Augustus is the best-natured person in the world, but I doubt if he knows much of his peasantry in either Saxony or Poland!" and she laughed again at the thought.

"He would be a better prince if he did," said H      , with a sternness strange in one of her youth and frivolous appearance. "Patkul says the day will surely come when all the peoples will rise up and cast down their rulers."

"Patkul is a fanatic and a visionary—a rebel also. Karl is his King. I am a Swede. H      , I have no sympathy with these revolting Livonians."

H       glanced at the vivid lovely face of the Countess and her eyes narrowed.

"The Elector would not care to hear you speak so of Sweden," she remarked.

"The Elector expects no hypocrisy from me," replied Aurora haughtily. "I am not his wife. He knows that a man like Karl would attract a woman like me—I have told him I should like to meet him."

She had, in truth, heard of the austere life and cold manners of the young conqueror whose name was now so famous in Europe, and she had imagined herself subduing him with her charm; she could not resist picturing herself as the Cleopatra to this immaculate C      ; Augustus had been amazed with anger at the Czar's crude suggestion that the famous beauty should be used to beguile their enemy, but the woman herself had long toyed with the idea; it would be a wonderful triumph and, she believed in her heart, an easy one. Karl was only a boy, after all, and had probably never been tempted; it was impossible that he intended to be absorbed for ever in schemes of

ing surprised them all into disaster, Aurora became angry with the war and those who had suggested it, and impatient with the enthusiastic Patkul, and gradually her attention had become fixed on the figure of the King of Sweden, rendered more arresting by every success, more terrible in the eyes of men and more attractive in the eyes of women.

Aurora knew something of what the Court of Sweden was like.

"He has never met a woman like me," she thought, and there was a glow, as of coming triumph, at her heart.

The other woman's reflections had traveled far from herself! they were with a fair, rather ordinary-looking soldier, with short-sighted, anxious eyes, and a blunt-featured face that had a certain pathos in its open sincerity and goodness, who was now probably riding to and fro in the confusion of battle, steadying the Saxon troops against the victorious ranks of Sweden.

She loved him so utterly, so ardently believed in his cause and his life-work that he seemed to her like a being charmed whom no actual danger could touch, yet she yearned over him, child as she was, with a yearning that was near tears; and this, though her whole being was pervaded by the supreme happiness of her love which kept her in a serene and beautiful aloofness from all that was painful or terrifying.

The monkey clambered to the end of the couch, dropped into Hélène's lap, and began stealing the sugar scattered over the cushions.

Aurora moved slowly from the mirror and told the page to bring her writing materials; when they were given her she began to write, not an answer to her lover's neglected letter but a paper of French verses to Karl XII.

Hélène, wrapt in her dreams, heeded her no more than she did the monkey crunching sweetmeats on her lap.

CHAPTER IV

IN July of that year Karl XII totally defeated the Saxon troops and forced the passage of the Dwina, near Riga, at a point where the river was nearly a mile wide, making use of specially built boats for the passage of his troops, and taking advantage of the direction of the wind to create a smoke-screen that concealed his crossing from the Saxons.

The battle was long and bloody, Courlande, Steinau, and Patkul fought with desperate bravery and considerable skill, but the victory of the great captain was complete; he passed on through Livonia, took Mitau, capital of Courland, and one after another all the towns of that duchy surrendered; the whole of Lithuania submitted.

At Birsén, where his enemies had so shortly before drawn up the league that they hoped was to be his ruin, he paused in his triumphal progress, taking his residence in the house occupied by Peter and Augustus.

He was now in an extraordinary position of greatness; he had been but little more than a year from Sweden and he had completely subdued his enemies, crushed the revolt in Livonia, consolidated his hold on the disputed provinces, and preserved his army in good health and perfect discipline with very little loss of life.

His fame had spread all over Europe, and Sweden occupied a sudden position of importance in the eyes of the West; the Czar's glory was eclipsed, and it was not believed likely that he would ever recover from Narva sufficiently to again face the King of Sweden.

What the next actions of this hero, as yet not twenty and in a position so unique, were likely to be, neither his friends nor his enemies could guess.

He affected a deep reserve, and there was no one who could boast of being entirely in his confidence, not even his brother-in-law, the Duke of Holstein-Gottorp, whom he had restored to his dominions and regarded with a certain affection, nor Count Piper, whom he kept near his person and trusted implicitly in political matters relating to the government of Sweden.

This latter, however, did not intend to remain so quietly in ignorance of his master's designs; he viewed Karl very differently since he had observed his military genius and his obstinate pride and perfect self-control, but he had not yet entirely relinquished all hopes of guiding this strange character into the paths trod by Karl XI.

Sweden was ever uppermost in Count Piper's thoughts; he believed that she occupied but a small place in those of the King; to the minister all the objects of the war had been now attained, and there remained but to make an honorable, durable, and glorious peace which should strengthen Sweden in position, commerce, and prestige.

And Count Piper felt that this was the moment, when Karl had the Baltic provinces under his feet and his enemies disordered and confused, to propose a set of terms, that however advantageous to Sweden, they would be in no position to refuse or even to dispute. As the King's haughty and glacial reserve allowed no indication of his future plans to escape him, Count Piper resolved to directly approach him, and endeavor to discover if he did not himself consider this a favorable moment for triumphantly concluding the war.

He found occasion to approach Karl one day after his dinner; this meal, of the greatest simplicity, the King always took with his officers; he was seldom more than half an hour at table; he drank only water and ate the plainest of food, never had he faltered an instant in his rigid self-discipline; his life could not have been

more hard, stern, and barren of all but duty; his one occasional amusement was to have portions of the old Scandinavian sagas read to him, but even of this he seemed slightly ashamed.

Count Piper found him now with his secretary in the room where Marpha had served Augustus and Peter with wine, and Mentchikoff had sung drunken chants for the amusement of the Saxon nobles.

Karl had had everything removed from the chamber but a table and a couple of chairs; on the walls were maps of Lithuania, Livonia, and Esthonia, and a large model of the globe in a black frame and roughly painted in bright colors, stood beneath. The King sat beneath one of the windows dictating to the secretary, a young Swedish officer, who sat at the table which was covered with neatly arranged papers.

Karl wore the costume he had not altered since he left Sweden; the dark blue cloth coat, the black satin cravat, the high boots, and buff gloves which he held now across his knee; his fair hair had been cut short and he wore no peruke.

He was bare-headed and the summer sunshine was full on his face, inscrutable in expression, showing superb health and hardihood in line and color.

As Count Piper entered he was sitting silent, like one wrapt in dreams, and the secretary was waiting, in respectful silence, for him to continue the correspondence.

As soon as he observed the minister he roused himself from his reverie, and with a gesture dismissed the secretary who rose and offered his chair, the only one in the room, to Count Piper.

The King looked at the older man with the blue eyes that seemed to express nothing but a steady strength and an adamant courage, and spoke pleasantly.

"You had something serious to say to me, Count?" he asked.

The minister had not seated himself but remained

standing, leaning against the back of the plain wooden chair; in his rather rich civilian attire, with his full peruke and fine appointments, he was in contrast to the camp-like simplicity of the room and the austere figure of the youthful soldier.

"I have come to ask your Majesty what you intend to do," said the Count; he knew that it was useless to try diplomacy or even tact with the King who was offended with all but the bluntest of speeches.

"You have been wishing to ask me that for some while, have you not?" smiled Karl, he was no longer brooding or thoughtful, but alert and keen.

"I think that this is a decisive moment in your career, sire, therefore in that of the history of Europe."

This was the kind of bold compliment that pleased the King.

"I believe so," he said calmly.

"You have, sire, achieved more than anyone could have believed possible—there only remains for you to bless your country with a lasting peace."

"Ah!" exclaimed Karl shortly, with his disagreeable laugh.

Count Piper faced him calmly.

"Is not that your Majesty's intention?"

"My intention," said Karl, with his stare of blank fortitude, "is to dethrone Augustus and Peter."

The minister caught his breath; this was more than he had anticipated, even from the headstrong obstinacy of a youthful hero flushed with success.

"Did you imagine, Count," asked the King, "that I should return to Sweden?"

"I hoped so," said the minister gravely.

"Why?" demanded the King.

"Because I am anxious for the honor and safety of our country. Sire, Sweden will be better served by moderation than extremes—she does not need conquests but good government."

"And you think that I should return home to govern?"

"Yes, sire."

"Not yet," replied Karl.

"What else does your Majesty propose to do?" asked the minister.

"I have told you."

"But, sire—to conquer Poland, Saxony, and Russia——"

"Do you not think," interrupted Karl, "that I am capable of executing this design?"

Count Piper was silent in sheer bewilderment; judging from the King's recent actions he was capable of anything; on the other hand, the conquest proposed was so vast, the means so comparatively small that common sense refused to be convinced even by the genius of this extraordinary young man.

"Well?" said Karl.

The minister fastened on the aspect that was always nearest his heart—how his country would be affected.

"Sweden will never stand the strain!" he exclaimed.

Karl shrugged his shoulders.

"It can be done," he said.

"Before God, sire, I do not think that it can."

The King's obstinate blue eyes did not falter; his lips were curved in a smile too indifferent for disdain but more freezing than contempt.

"Think, sire," continued Count Piper energetically, "of the size and resources of these three countries—Saxony will have all the German States behind him—Russia is a continent."

Karl's face now betrayed where his principal hate lay.

"Peter is a savage commanding savages," he replied; "the whip and not the sword is necessary to disperse his hordes."

"You think of Narva," said Count Piper, "but he will learn. He will train his men."

"And if he does?" demanded Karl coldly, "what of the passage of the Dwina? Am I not able to resist veteran troops?"

The minister could not deny the truth of this; to all appearance Karl was invincible, yet the Count's heart utterly misgave him at thought of the gigantic enterprise to which the King appeared to have pledged himself.

"It is purposeless, sire, and useless," he said with vigor. "Sweden could never hold these conquests if she made them; Europe would not permit it, nor her own strength. You have made her secure and powerful, respected and feared; have the strength, sire, to stop. This is not the age for sheer conquest. War bars the progress of mankind. Sweden requires your Majesty's genius for her internal reforms; you do not know yet your own country—your father, sire, knew it from end to end."

If the King considered this speech too much of a reproof he did not say so nor show his resentment by the slightest sign.

"You think I should return to Stockholm, Count?" he asked.

"After you have secured a victorious peace—a peace that will leave the Duke of Holstein-Gottorp restored to his estate, you master of the Baltic Provinces, Denmark silenced, Saxony and Russia punished. Sire," added the minister with a smile, "I think no young prince could desire greater glory than this."

This hurt the secret pride of the King, which hid itself under such an aspect of stern modesty.

"I do not fight for glory," he said haughtily, "but to dethrone these villains."

Count Piper was silenced; in these words he read the wild dreams of unpractical youth, the mad schemes of a man who believed war the only profession for a prince, the only occupation worthy of a gentleman, and who would consider nothing beside his ambition.

"Sweden does not need this war," he said, "nor can she afford it."

But this argument was entirely lost on the King, who loved to achieve the impossible; the difficulty and

magnitude of the enterprise were what gave it, in his eyes, its great attraction.

And Count Piper now began to experience the force of the King's extraordinary qualities, his hard obstinacy, his blind fortitude.

The King rose, and crushed his gloves in his strong white hands.

"I would as soon," he said, with as much violence and impatience as he ever showed, "be in my coffin as in Stockholm. I should feel as confined in one as in the other."

"Does your Majesty never intend to see your capital again?" asked Count Piper sorrowfully.

The King stared at him; the good of Sweden or any interest in her was far from the mind that was full of dreams of the conquest of Russia and the subjugation of Poland and Saxony.

Karl had completely abandoned the government of his country to the Council of Regency; he hardly troubled to acquaint himself with their proceedings, and often left unread the home dispatches.

Patriotism did not touch his dreams of the cold greatness he had conceived for himself. "I told my people," he said, looking, not at his minister, but out of the window at the summer sunshine on the dusty road, "that I would never make an unjust war nor abandon a just one, without the punishment of the offenders."

"Are not these same offenders already sufficiently punished?" demanded Piper quickly.

"No," replied the King, and now his strange eyes showed a faint but fierce fire like those of a noble animal roused from slumber to anger. "Not unless they are dethroned."

"Is it your Majesty's ambition to wear these crowns?"

The King laughed shortly.

"I want nothing but to punish my enemies," he replied. "What are crowns to me?"

Boastful as the words sounded, Count Piper believed they were sincere; he had already seen how, in the defeat of Denmark, Karl had astonished the world by demanding nothing for himself, and he could credit that Karl was capable of exhausting his country and spending himself in the effort to gain countries only to give them away when he had conquered them; he did not want Russia, only the pleasure of dethroning the Czar; he had no desire to reign over Poland, only the wish to seize that country from Saxony.

"I think your Majesty is wrong," said the minister. "As one who was your father's friend and is the friend of Sweden, forgive me if I say so, sire, if you stop now you are safe and glorious, if you go on, it may be to disaster."

The King winced at the sound of that word which no one had ever dared to utter to him before.

"When I have humbled these two kings and punished one other we may talk of peace," he said curtly. "I speak of John Rheinhold Patkul."

His fair face, so beautiful in line, but so devoid of expression as to lack all attraction, hardened into an aspect of sheer cruelty new to Count Piper; the King whose first act had been to abolish judicial torture from his statute books had hitherto been considered as of a merciful disposition, nor had his campaigns been stained even by the usual excesses of war; yet his look as he spoke of the Livonian was one of fierce hate and cruelty.

"Before I return to Stockholm," he added, "Patkul must——"

He paused abruptly; it was evident that his cold magnanimity did not extend to the man whom he regarded as a rebel and a traitor.

"Both Peter and Augustus are pledged to defend Patkul," said Piper; "it is not likely that he will be taken by your Majesty—he is too wary and skilful."

"I will force Augustus to deliver him to me," said Karl, still with that ugly look on his face.

"Your Majesty would make that one of the terms of peace?" asked Count Piper in a curious voice.

"The first condition. And, Count, it is useless for us to converse further. I have never liked talking. And my mind is made up about the future. And I was always tolerably resolute in my decisions nor likely to be moved in any way from my resolves."

It was the end between King and minister; these words were as a dismissal to Count Piper; he saw that Karl was set upon a path entirely different to that followed by his father; his aim was the pursuit of fantastic dreams of purposeless and costly conquest—he would make war neither for the defense nor the aggrandizement of his country, but merely to suit his own ideas of kingly occupation, his own secret ideals of ambition and glory; he would probably ruin his country and might do considerable harm to mankind, but he could not be stopped from the mad use of the power which he held in his hands; at that moment Piper disliked him; he was alienated by this cold obstinacy and by the look and manner of Karl when he had spoken of Patkul; the minister would almost rather have served Peter whose aims were progressive, not obstructive, and whose madnesses were never without an object, and whose cruelties were never cold-blooded but the result of inflamed passions.

He turned away and took a brief leave.

"An extraordinary man," he said to himself, as he left the King's presence, "but there is no true greatness in him."

Karl, on his part, was equally disgusted with Count Piper.

"I want no politicians about my camp," he told his brother-in-law that evening. "We are soldiers with soldiers' work to do," and he began to discuss his plans for an advance on Cracovia and Varsovia.

BOOK IV

AURORA VON KÖNIGSMARCK

"Sylve paludes, aggeres, hostes, victi."—Medal of Karl XII.

CHAPTER I

I THINK you have no idea of the confusion of my affairs—nor of their apparent hopelessness. I speak of them to you because you are the only person whom I can trust."

Thus Augustus to Aurora, and in these words she read his confession of utter defeat; she was deeply vexed; for some time past she had displayed ill-humor at the growing discomforts and perils of her situation; she was now at Varsovia, a barbaric place that she disliked, where Augustus had come to attend the Polish Diet that he had been forced to convoke. It was midwinter, and she sat over the fire in the huge stone chamber that was so difficult to warm, her great coat of lemon-colored velvet lined with white fur, thrown open on her lace gown, and the leaping glow of the firelight all over her bright beauty.

She knew that perhaps her principal hold on Augustus was her good temper, and seldom was she betrayed into anger; but now her disappointment made her answer sharp.

"Why do you not abandon Poland and return to Saxony?" she asked.

The King-Elector looked at her reproachfully.

"Is that your comfort?" he asked.

"I think that it is very good advice," she replied, controlling herself not to speak bitterly.

Augustus, who looked tired and haggard (he was indeed more fitted to be the head of a brilliant court, the patron of arts and letters, than to confront these troublesome times), flushed with rising annoyance.

"It is useless to discuss with you, Madame," he said, "what you are too flippant to understand——"

"Oh," interrupted Aurora, "do I not understand that I am at Varsovia in midwinter, cold and dull? That you are always ill-humored and absorbed in affairs, and that I have no company beyond Hélène who is love-sick, a parrot, and a monkey?"

Augustus rose from his seat by the great oak table.

"Very well," he said quietly, "you had better return to Dresden, Madame. It is true that here I can give you no comfort. It is also true that I must remain—my crown, all my fortunes and perhaps my life, depend on these events."

Aurora bit her lip in vexation at her own peevishness; she scorned fretful women, and she was moved by her lover's gentle response.

She got up impulsively and held out her hands; a gorgeous creature in her rich clothes and vivid loveliness, illuminated by the tawny light of the flaming pine knots.

"Forgive me," she said quickly. "I am ashamed of myself. I have been idle and frivolous, tell me how I can help."

He kissed her hands in instant gratitude; he had always found her his best friend; she was more intelligent, perhaps more courageous than he, but she had managed never to offend him with her superiority, and she always soothed him with her firmness and encouraged him with her high spirits.

She smiled now with a certain tenderness at this magnificent-looking prince who was so downcast and so almost helpless; in her wild heart she perhaps a little despised him; certainly he was not her ideal hero, for

all his strength and handsomeness and charm, but both out of kindness and interest she was his ally.

"Come," she said, "forget, sire, that I am a woman, and talk to me as if I was your minister."

She took the seat at the table he had just left and drew her coat round her, leaning back and looking at Augustus, who remained standing by the fire.

"My dear," he answered, "I do not know if affairs could be much worse."

"This Diet is not going to help you?"

"Would to God I had never had to summon it!" exclaimed the King-Elector. "The King of Sweden has as much influence there as I!"

"Ah!" murmured Aurora, "they are not loyal to you, these Polish princes?"

"There is not one man in Poland loyal to me," replied Augustus bitterly; "this cursed war has alienated all of them."

The Countess knew that good statecraft would have foreseen this; Poland, afraid of Sweden and jealous of its Saxon King, was fiercely resentful of a war bound to end in her subjugation either at the hands of Karl XII or at those of her own elected monarch; the remnants of the Saxon troops who had survived the battle of Riga Augustus had had to send back to Saxony to quiet the Poles, and for the same reason he had been obliged to call a Diet when he wished to raise an army.

Aurora, remembering the time and money spent on acquiring the crown of Poland, wondered if the bargain had been a good one for Augustus, who, used to being an absolute ruler in his own hereditary dominions, found himself little more than head of a Republic in Poland.

"Who are your enemies in the Diet?" she asked gently.

"Leczinski, of course, the Lubomirski, and the Sobieski—these and their followers are all secretly with the King of Sweden, and, naturally," added

Augustus, with, for him, considerable heat, "Cardinal Radziekowski is playing his own game which is not mine."

"In brief," said Aurora, "these Poles are seizing this moment for their own intrigues; they consider you as more dangerous than Karl, and would as willingly see you overthrown."

This plain view of the case slightly startled Augustus, but he had to admit that it was true.

"And there is the revolt in Lithuania," he added gloomily. "The Sapieha and the Oginski at each other's throats—my troops in fugitive parties living on rapine because I have not the money to pay them——"

"You cannot summon the Polish nobles to raise their followers on your behalf?"

"I dare not—for it would be to risk a refusal."

Aurora bit her lip.

"But you have the Polish army."

"There are only 18,000 men—not paid, not armed—and their generals uncertain whether to fight for me or Sweden!"

"And every one knows this?"

"I fear that my weakness is but too apparent—see how they have forced my hand in the matter of the Diet!"

"And you dare not bring back the Saxon troops?"

"It would be the excuse and the signal for a general revolt in Poland," replied the King-Elector.

Aurora von Königsmarck mentally cursed Poland; she had been perfectly content in Dresden before ambition had urged Augustus into this troublesome glory.

"What will the Diet do?" she asked, suppressing her irritation and speaking with gentleness.

Augustus began pacing up and down the room.

"Who can tell?" he replied wearily, "intrigues and counter-intrigues—all irresolute, all crying out for freedom and justice and none knowing where to look for

it! Meanwhile everything goes to ruin while they are talking, and the King of Sweden advances daily deeper into the country."

Aurora frowned; hitherto, with a woman's evasiveness, she had refused to glance at the state of matters in Poland; now she forced herself to face them, and to apply all her intelligence to helping her lover in what seemed indeed a desperate pass.

"And the Czar?" she asked.

"The Czar needs assistance himself," said Augustus grimly.

"But the Muscovites? Did you not tell me that he was sending some men into Lithuania?"

The King-Elector became angry at the thought of this, the sole fruit of the secret treaty of Birsén.

"He has sent some villains who are doing more damage than the Swedes," he replied hotly. "They have turned freebooters, and are utterly deaf to discipline and orders—'tis but so many marauders the more in the wretched kingdom, and yet further inflames the Poles."

Aurora could not forbear a smile.

"There are the troops you were to train?" she asked.

"Yes, God help me, and now they are here I have not a single Saxon officer available—not that a corps of Turenne's veterans could train these savages!"

Aurora knew, though she forbore to mention it, that Augustus had failed to fulfil his side of the bargain, and had not been able to raise a single regiment of the German troops promised to Peter, nor to pay him anything for the maintenance of the Muscovites sent into Lithuania.

"So you see," added the Elector, with rather a bitter smile, "that my position is desperate on all sides."

"Come here," smiled Aurora.

He crossed to her chair; she took his hand and pressed her soft cheek against his rings and ruffles.

"My poor dear," she said caressingly. "I wonder

if I can help you now, to return a little all the joy you have given me?"

She would have kissed his hand, but he prevented her, eagerly lifted her face and kissed her lips.

"What have I done for you!" he cried. "Why, you have gilded all my life!"

"You have been very good to me," she said, a little wistfully. "Men can be so cruel. I think you hardly know how grateful women are for kindness."

He smiled tenderly; his handsome face lightened of half its care as he looked at her.

"Not women like you, Aurora!"

"Yes, women like me," she replied. "Why—you might get tired of me." She caught her breath a little. "I might fade—I am not as pretty as I was—but you——"

"Aurora—I adore you."

"Thank you," said the Countess unsteadily. "Thank you for loving me. That is why I want to help you—you have made life wonderful to me by your love——"

He dropped his hands to her shoulders and she looked up at him.

"And you—have you not loved me, Aurora?" he asked.

"Oh, a woman's love does not count!"

Augustus did not understand her mood, he was not a man to nicely read a woman's complexities; and the next second Aurora did not understand it herself, and was lifting her shoulders with a laugh both for her words and his bewilderment.

"I am a silly creature," she said lightly, "but I only seek to please you."

She gently drew herself away, rose and went to the fire; the yellow coat, the gleaming hair, dressed in long, smooth curls slightly disordered and falling over the smooth white fur; the proud air and bearing of her, the piquant, gay face, made a fair picture in the brilliant glow that shone on her from head to foot and

threw her figure, a thing of light against the gloomy background of the room, darkening in the fading light of the winter afternoon.

"Now—my advice," she said. "I wonder—will you take it?"

Augustus smiled at her; his handsome face was no longer troubled as he gazed at this brilliant, darling companion of his; his distresses that sat lightly enough on him anyhow were almost forgotten as he contemplated her courage and her gaiety.

"Tell me," he answered gently.

There was something of challenge, almost of defiance in her beautiful eyes as she replied, but she spoke very sweetly.

"You must make peace with Karl."

Augustus did not speak.

"Of course you will have to take his terms, but it seems to be his rôle to be generous," continued the Countess. "And better be at his mercy than at that of the Poles, your own subjects."

Augustus thought so too; it was not very pleasant to contemplate humbling himself before the boy King whom he had hoped to conquer so easily, but his pride was not very deep-seated, and he bore no rancor against anyone, not even against the man who had defeated him; if he could purchase ease and safety by submitting to Karl he was ready to do so without any bitterness, and, as Aurora suggested, it was easier to accept terms from a fellow-monarch than from his own subjects.

"You must open negotiations at once before you lose everything," continued the Countess quickly.

"But he will not listen—why should he?" returned Augustus doubtfully.

"If the ambassador is well chosen he will listen."

"But it is no object to him to make peace," said the King-Elector uneasily. "Doubtless he will prefer the glory of overrunning Poland and possibly Saxony."

Aurora did not yet mention what made her feel sure

that the King of Sweden might be brought to reason; she was sure that her project would be distasteful to Augustus, and she was waiting her moment to broach it; twisting one of her long ringlets round the slender fingers of her left hand that sparkled with some of the Saxon jewels, she frowned into the flames.

"No," added Augustus gloomily. "I see no hope—'tis a youthful captain, intoxicated with success, inured and implacable by nature. I believe he fights for glory, and nothing, to him, would be greater glory than the conquest of Poland—by arms and by intrigues. He thinks to dethrone me by means of factions—look how he has armed the Sapieha against me and torn Lithuania with civil war——"

"I know," interrupted Aurora, curbing some impatience; it seemed to her that Augustus went round and round the same points, in a confused manner, which was irritating to her own clear mind that looked ahead to ultimate issues. "But the trial might be made."

"It would have to be secret," said the King-Elector, "and kept very carefully from the ears of Patkul and the Czar."

"Naturally," replied the Countess drily. "The Czar will be easily hoodwinked; as for Patkul, it is he who is the cause of all this trouble, if need be he must be sacrificed."

Augustus turned a startled face.

"Patkul?"

"Yes, Patkul, this adventurer who has embroiled us all!"

"You mean that I should surrender him to Karl?"

"If Karl demanded it."

"God forbid!" cried the King-Elector hastily.

"Oh, Sweden would be merciful," said Aurora impatiently, "as I told you, it is his rôle."

"He would not be merciful to Patkul," replied Augustus, "who, besides, is Peter's envoy, and sacred."

"Oh, bah!" exclaimed Aurora, with a flash of her

gorgeous eyes. "What is the Czar to you, or what has he done for you that he should be considered?"

"My honor and the law of nations——" began Augustus.

The Countess speedily demolished this masculine defense.

"Where," she asked acutely, "was either, when you attacked the King of Sweden?"

As this action had been contrary to both, the King-Elector had nothing to reply; rather pale, he stared at the ground.

"You see," added Aurora, anxious to soothe now that she had silenced, "it is not, and never has been, any question of any law or any honor, but simply of each man for himself in a desperate game."

Augustus sighed.

"We need not raise the question of Patkul," he said, with the evasion of weakness.

"We must," replied the Countess. "For I believe it will be the first thing the King of Sweden will demand, and we must know how to answer him."

Augustus did not speak; he did not think it possible that he could ever come so low as to deliver the man who trusted him to his enemy, but he thought that Karl might be pacified with some apparent submission and Patkul saved nevertheless.

"As you said yourself," continued Aurora, "matters are desperate, and we cannot pause for niceties."

She cared nothing herself for anyone but the man who, at once her master and her slave, was essential to her power and therefore to her happiness; the terrors of war, the miseries of the peasantry, the sufferings of the civilian populace, the bloodshed, the families ruined, the lands laid desolate, did not touch Aurora von Königs-marck; her gay and volatile nature did not even glance at the dark side of life.

Already, in this bitter crisis, her spirits were rising at the thought of the new exciting and brilliant part she intended to play with so much success.

Patkul was to her but a pawn in an elaborate and delicate game, and she had completely forgotten Hélène D'Einsiedel.

She went up to Augustus and laid her proud head against the laces on his breast; tall as she was she hardly reached to his heart.

Clasping him tightly in her lovely arms, and looking up at him, all soft and smiling, she whispered: "I will be your envoy to Karl of Sweden!"

Augustus remembered Peter's words at Birsén, and caught hold of her hands and held her away from him with a movement almost of anger.

Aurora only laughed; she had foreseen this opposition and knew that in the end, as always, she would have her own will.

CHAPTER II

AURORA VON KÖNIGSMARCK left the King-Elector's presence more elated than she had been since the Polish troubles began.

Augustus had promised to allow her to conduct secret negotiations with Karl; she was to travel as soon as possible to his camp, and through the influence of Count Piper, an ancient friend of her family, she was to obtain a private interview with Karl.

The King-Elector was to offer to withdraw all claims to the Baltic provinces and to renounce all alliances against Sweden, also, if need be, to surrender Patkul, but this, Augustus stipulated, was to be done in such a manner that Patkul should be enabled to escape to Russia.

Aurora gave her promise; she was not greatly concerned for Patkul, she thought that if she was able to influence Karl at all she could influence him to be generous to the Livonian; but the thing weighed on the mind of Augustus; his weakness, torn between honor and prudence, caused him the acutest suffering his easy temperament had ever known.

He went to attend one of the bitter stormy sittings of the Diet, sad and sullen, unlike the gracious prince who had charmed Poland as much by his gaiety and good-nature as by his gold and his soldiery.

He was humiliated by the position in which he found himself, irritated that Aurora had won his consent to expedients that he despised, and tortured by inner doubts as to whether all concessions might not be in vain, and Karl remain adamant even before the potent charms of Aurora.

No such misgivings troubled Aurora von Königsmarck; neither the honor nor the utility of what she had undertaken disturbed her, for she did not perceive anything contemptible in what she did, and she felt assured of her success.

But as she turned up the narrow dark stairs to go to her own apartment, she was startled by a slight figure leaning in an angle of the wall, and a swift sensation, as of shame, touched her heart; the girl before her was Hélène D'Einsiedel. Aurora had completely forgotten her, but now she felt abashed before this child, her own favorite, to whom she had always been a kind protector and patroness.

"Come upstairs," she said hastily, glad of the dark that concealed her face. "You will get cold here; what a silly child it is."

The girl did not reply, she wore a dark pelisse over a dark dress, a great hat that shaded her face and was but dimly seen in the shadow.

"Come with me," continued Aurora, her momentary uneasiness passing. "Why have you been out this bitter day?"

But even as she spoke she knew full well; General Patkul had been at Varsovia to consult with Augustus, and was due to return to the theater of war; Hélène had been to say good-bye.

"You should have made him come to you—you are too fond of this man."

She took Hélène gently by the shoulder and led her upstairs.

"He did come, he has been with me a long time," said Hélène, in a muffled voice. "And then I went with him a little way—it was good-bye."

"La, la," replied the Countess, "one would think it was forever by your voice!"

They entered her apartments that clever French maids and valets had arranged in tolerable imitation of the gorgeous chambers at Dresden. Silk and wool tapestries covered the walls, delicate carpets the floors, the grace-

ful furniture, cushions, mirrors, and ornaments, without which Aurora never traveled, were elegantly disposed, and a perfumed fire burnt on the wide, old-fashioned hearth.

A maid was just lighting the candles in their tall sticks of tortoise-shell and gold, another was drawing the curtains of sapphire-blue velvet across the windows, so shutting out the mournful prospect of the winter evening.

Hélène stood stupidly in the middle of the room looking at the fire; she had neither gloves nor muff, and her little hands hung red and cold at her side.

Her face was pale and distressed, the black beaver hat falling carelessly over her tangled curls, her pelisse was roughly dragged together with a silver clasp fastened crookedly, and she wore her thin house shoes which were slightly stained with dirty snow.

"Come, child," said Aurora kindly. "This grief and agitation are useless. Nothing has happened."

"Things are terrible," replied Hélène in a low, hurried voice. "You know yourself that all goes as if to disaster. The armies broken, the country in a turmoil—and he is leaving me."

On these childish words a sob broke her voice, and tears filled her eyes already reddened with weeping.

She seemed indifferent to the presence of the Countess and the two chamber women, and continued to stare into the fire, raising her clasped trembling hands to her quivering lips while the tears fell on to her knuckles.

Aurora wanted to say "Patkul is safe," but the words stuck in her throat, even though she quieted her conscience by the resolve that by some underhand means the Livonian must be saved.

She shivered a little in her warm coat, and spread out her fair hands to the fire.

"It is hard for all of us," she said evenly. "Do you think, dear, that I like Varsovia? And as for

the Elector he is more ill-natured than I have ever known him; I wish he would go to the war and rid me of his moods. These wretched Poles are giving a great deal of trouble, and there is no denying that for the moment the King of Sweden has the advantage."

"Patkul thinks there is no hope at all for Livonia," murmured Hélène. "He saw in the battle of the Dwina what these Swedes are."

"I think my countrymen are tolerably good soldiers," said the Countess.

The Saxon girl disliked her for this remark, and turned away abruptly; the beautiful, comfortable room seemed to her hateful; she ran to the door, pulled it open, and fled down the dark stairs; she heard the Countess's voice half-laughing, half-angry, raised in protest, but she took no heed; nothing mattered to her now in the world but the fact that she must see her lover again before a separation that, some dreadful premonition told her, would be long if not eternal.

She could not explain to herself why she was so terrified and overwrought; this love of hers, born amid the tumults of wars and factions, had known many bitter partings and long absences, but youthful hope and joy had hitherto kept her immune from the terrors that assailed her to-night. She must see him again; it was as if her body moved without motion, so strong was the force of the spirit within, as if the cold night air carried her, a disembodied creature, to his side.

It was now nearly dark, the town full of soldiery and discontented civilians; Hélène did not notice these things nor yet the bitter cold; she hastened along the frozen roads, the dried snow flying from beneath her feet, the fresh snow, beginning to drift in flakes from the leaden sky, falling on her dark clothes and chilled face and hands.

She found the house where he lodged; it was not far from the residence of the King-Elector. At the

sight of the light in the windows the blood seemed to stir in her body again; he was still there; she would see him again, nothing seemed to matter but that the whole future narrowed to this moment of their meeting.

A Polish soldier was just leaving the house. Hélène brushed by him, stepped into the dim-lit hall, and asked the Livonian servant standing there for his master.

Before the man had time to reply General Patkul appeared in the doorway of a room immediately inside the entrance.

They advanced towards each other, and he seized her in his arms and almost carried her into the room.

It was a small rough chamber, lit by an oil lamp and a log fire; some half-packed valises lay on the floor and the table was strewn with papers, portfolios, and maps.

He expressed no surprise at thus seeing her again so soon after their farewell, but, caressing her, led her to the great chair with arms by the fire, threw back her damp coat, and chafed her cold hands.

"I had to come," she murmured, looking up at him in speechless joy. "You know that, do you not?"

"I have been thinking of you so it seems as if you had never left me," he answered; his whole face and neck had flushed, and his narrowed short-sighted eyes had darkened till they looked black as he gazed at her. "You come between me and everything, Hélène, even my unfortunate country."

"You must not go," she said, with sudden energy, "it is quite impossible—do you hear?"

"Darling—I leave to-morrow morning. Presently I will take you home in a sledge and you will dream of me, knowing that I am happy in the thought of you, and in that I am doing my plain duty."

As he spoke, with great tenderness and the gravity of an ardent enthusiast, he went on his knees, and tak-

ing her little cold slippered feet in his hands, rubbed them and held them nearer to the fire.

"What do I know of duty?" asked Hélène desperately. "I want to be happy."

"You have never spoken like this before, my dearest."

"I have never been so frightened before."

"Frightened?"

He lifted his honest gray eyes, so shining with noble love to the frail face bending towards him; she touched the curls of his blond peruke that hung on his breast.

"Yes, frightened, John."

"Why?"

"That I could not tell. But you do not think these things are foolish, do you? When I had left you just now I felt that I could not bear it—it was like someone tearing my limbs from me—as if I had to follow you or die—as—as if—I might never see you again——"

Her words stumbled over one another. She grasped the lapels of his soldier's coat; her pleading eyes were fixed on his face with an expression of passionate entreaty.

"Oh, you will stay—you will not leave me!"

"My dear, my dear!" he cried deeply moved, "this must not be—you will unman me."

He rose and raised her to his breast, clasping her tightly; he dared not voice the agony in his heart, how he entirely longed to keep her now that she had flown back to him—how wrong and wicked all further parting seemed, and how utterly paltry all his schemes and duties seemed beside the fact that they were together, and the wish that they should be forever together.

For he loved her as stern men, engrossed in affairs and indifferent to feminine influence, will sometimes love one woman—with complete trust and devotion.

He had never known what life could mean until he met her; she made his former pleasures appear pale, his former work dry and purposeless; she infused into his whole life color and joy and beauty.

And she must be foregone.

He looked ahead into the future and saw it dark and uncertain, and wished that he did not enjoy such perilous greatness, and that his lot had been cast in times less fierce and turbulent.

Now that he held her, trembling, but content against his own wildly-beating heart, the task he had undertaken seemed so difficult as to be impossible; Livonia was in a worse plight than she had been when he undertook her liberation; the huge conspiracy against Karl XII which had cost so much toil and pains had only succeeded in rousing a captain who made North Europe tremble, and in settling the Swedish yoke more firmly on the necks of the wretched people of the Baltic Provinces.

"Perhaps I had better have left it all alone—perhaps I was not born to do my country this service!" he exclaimed.

Hélène looked up at him, pressing her flushed face closer to the braidings on his uniform.

"You must not go, you are safe here," she answered, as if reassuring him.

He laughed tenderly at her feminine point of view; he had not been thinking of his personal safety, but of the fierce disappointment of his apparent failure.

"I am in no danger," he said, to comfort her; and he believed what he said; not only was he the Czar's envoy but he trusted, without question, the protection of Augustus, nor did he even imagine for a moment that the King-Elector would enter into secret peace negotiations with Karl.

Hélène also had faith in the people who had always been her friends and protectors; it would have been impossible for her to suspect Aurora von Königsmarck of treachery; yet she felt this tremendous though vague uneasiness as to her lover's safety.

He saw the trouble in her sweet eyes which were wide and bewildered like those of a child in pain.

"Do you not think that I shall be as safe in Dresden as in Varsovia?" he asked.

"You are going to Dresden?"

"Eventually, dear. I return to the army in Saxony with messages from Augustus. Then I wish to see the Czar. My greatest hope is in him——"

"God preserve him," said Héléne simply. "What will he do for you?"

"More than Augustus, I think. He is a man of genius. A tyrant, of course—no more a lover of liberty than Karl—but he serves our ends. Give him time and he will beat Sweden."

"How happy you will be that day!" smiled the girl.

"If it means the freedom of Livonia," he replied, looking at her earnestly.

Neither were paying much attention to what they were speaking of; they were thinking only of each other, of the wonder of these few moments and the long dark separation ahead of them; each in their heart was crying out against this parting; clinging to each other they spoke quietly to steady themselves and prolong these last farewells.

But now she could talk no more of politics, not even of those with which her lover's life and happiness were bound up.

"When shall I see you again?" she stammered.

In silence he gazed at her; his short-sighted eyes narrowed as he dwelt on every lineament of the beloved face.

"What is the need of this?" whispered Héléne. "Why should one suffer?"

"Love, we part to meet again—if it was forever you might weep——"

"Supposing it was forever?" the dreadful thought transfixed her; she drew herself away from his embrace, her face sharp and pale, "but, of course, I should die," she added, with a little sigh of relief.

He could not trust himself to answer her; taking his hands from her shoulders he turned abruptly away across the plain dismal room.

The fire was burning low and the air was becoming cold; the outside night showed in the black squares in the uncurtained windows; now and then the red reflection of a passing torch or lantern glimmered across the shadowed room.

Patkul stared at the fine frost flowers hardening on the glass; he had his back to Hélène; she took off her hat which had fallen back on to her tangled hair, mechanically arranged her curls, and replaced the hat; then with stiff fingers she fastened the pelisse.

She was too young and simple to lament against destiny or to endeavor to alter her fate with violent hands; her court training and the society of Aurora von Königsmarck had not altered the direct outlook and conventional point of view of her young girl's heart and mind.

She had been taken out of herself, inasmuch as she had come to him now spurred by the awful desolation, the unexplainable sense of disaster that had torn her soul; now she could do no more; she did not know how to deal with the moment, but stood stupidly arranging her hat and buttoning her pelisse in dumb wretchedness.

He thought wildly of taking her with him, of marrying her without delay or ceremony; his heart contracted as he imagined her always with him—as Marpha was with Peter—or Aurora with Augustus—his companion, his consolation, and his hope in all his adventures. Sweetening even ultimate defeat, if it must be, or glorifying ultimate victory into a happiness more than mortal.

He looked at her, strode over to her, took her by the shoulders and turned her round, forcing her to look at him; slender and frail she quivered under his grasp.

The agony of question in his gaze met no response from hers which was full of nothing but blank, sad love.

He knew that if he asked her she would come—he

knew that he could not ask her; "when the war is over I will marry her," he thought, and stilled his heart with that.

Very gently he kissed her cold face.

"I must take you home," he said.

"I will try to be brave," replied Hélène.

They went together to the door; the darkness was thick with snow; he sent his servant for the sledge and they had another moment alone; but neither spoke.

Hélène felt suddenly very tired, almost drowsy; she was exhausted by her strong emotion to the point of apathy.

When the sledge came she stepped in obediently; there was a brief ride through the cold and the dark; his chilled lips on her chilled cheek, some stammering words and they had parted. She could hear the jingling of his sledge-bells as she returned to her room; she seemed to be in a world empty of everything but that one sound.

Aurora von Königsmarck looked from the door of her brilliantly lit room; she had gay words on her lips, but after glancing at the girl's face she went back silently to her place by the perfumed fire.

CHAPTER III

AURORA VON KÖNIGSMARCK, accompanied by a few servants and a small escort of Saxon cavalry, traveled secretly to the Swedish camp in Lithuania.

Karl was advancing on Grodno, and the affairs of Augustus looked daily more unfortunate; at the last moment he had wished to stop this journey of the Countess, and to send a formal embassy in his own name and that of the Polish Republic to ask the conqueror's peace terms.

But Aurora was resolute that this depth of humiliation should not be reached, and confident that Karl could be persuaded to private means of agreement with Augustus.

In any case she was determined to try her influence on a man so singular and so famous.

"It has certainly never seen a woman like me," she repeated to herself, not with vanity but as the calm statement of a fact.

She had no difficulty in obtaining an audience of Count Piper.

The minister was cynically interested in her mission; he was now no longer in the confidence of his master (if indeed he had ever been so), and performed his duties as a servant, not as a friend; perhaps he faintly disliked the King; in any case he was grimly amused at the idea of exposing Karl to the fascinations of a woman like Aurora von Königsmarck and facing the fair Countess with a man like the King.

He offered her little hope.

"The King is bent on conquest," he said. "He has

no idea of a tame peace, but intends to dethrone all his enemies."

"The dreams of a boy," replied Aurora.

Count Piper shrugged.

"A boy who will carry out his dreams or perish, Madame."

"So obstinate?" she smiled, "and has he no weaknesses, this hero?" she added, with an inflection of light scorn.

The minister smiled; he saw her superb confidence in her radiant beauty and brilliant intelligence, in her experience and charm; he thought that her perfections would be wasted on the man who had received without a change of color the news of the death of the only woman in whom he had ever been interested.

"I do not say that I do not wish you good fortune, Madame," he said, "for myself there are other things besides war. And I should be glad of a peace. As for the King, I know little of him, for all that I have watched him since a child—or else there is little to know. He has no friends, and no favorites, and since the war began I have not known him influenced."

"He is so young," remarked Aurora, "do you think this military austerity will last all his life?"

"'Tis a hard race," replied the Count, "but as you say—he is young."

"Let me see him," urged Aurora, "my mission can but move and alter him—if he would play Alexander he must be prepared for the family of Darius."

"I will do my utmost," said Count Piper, and with sincerity; but he was soon piqued by finding that he had promised too easily; Karl absolutely refused to see Aurora von Königsmarck.

"Why should I talk to a woman on this business?" he said. "If Augustus wants peace let him send a man to ask for it." Without the least emotion he resisted the Count's efforts to persuade and induce him to see the fair ambassadress.

"She will think you are afraid of her," remarked the Count, with some malice.

"I have no doubt a woman's vanity would go that length," replied the King calmly. "Tell her I am afraid of her," he gave his ugly smile, "if that will content her."

"Nothing will content her but an interview with your Majesty."

"Then she must leave dissatisfied," said Karl, with an indifference more hopeless to combat than open anger.

The minister reported his ill-success to the Countess; she had not expected that the King would refuse even to see her, and angry disappointment nerved her with yet greater determination to gain her object.

"I will achieve my end by other means," she said, and thanked Count Piper for his useless services.

Though she had been a week near the camp, lodging, most inconveniently, in one of the little village houses, she had not yet seen the King, save once when he had swept by with a number of his guards, and she had not been able to distinguish his person.

But she soon ascertained that it was his custom to ride abroad unattended in the early morning and the afternoon, and she resolved to encounter him on one of these occasions, and one day stationed herself in her little light carriage on the road the King took most frequently.

As soon as her servant pointed out a solitary horseman coming towards them, saying, "The King of Sweden!" Aurora descended into the road still covered with frozen snow, and put herself in the middle of the way, holding her black fur mantle up from the road, and looking steadily up under the broad brim of her beaver hat.

The King approached, and, as soon as he saw her, sharply reined up his iron-gray charger, sending the scattered snow over the lady.

"Sire," said Aurora, "I have never been a suppliant before; will you not make it a little easy for a beggar and—a woman?"

It was not quite what she had intended to say, and

her voice faltered more than she had meant it to, for she was taken aback by the magnificent appearance and curious personality of the man to whom she spoke.

The King, with his plain uniform, black satin stock, remarkable face of immobile, almost displeasing beauty, was totally different to her preconceived notions of Karl.

He had himself so well in hand that he did not even change color at her address; he touched his hat in a stiff military salute, turned his horse, deftly, and rode back the way he had come.

It was a long while since the angry blood had rushed into Aurora's face as it did now, coloring her fair skin from throat to forehead.

"So that is the King of Sweden!" she murmured. She shivered in her heavy furs and mounted her carriage, gazing after the figure of the departing horseman, clear against the pale tints of a sky colored with the first blue of a Northern spring.

She could do nothing but leave the scene of her defeat, but she did not accept her discomfiture as final; at least now she knew his person and could judge him, perhaps manage him better in consequence.

He was her own countryman, yet this type of the pure Scandinavian was fresh to her, after the many years she had lived abroad, and the fairness, hardness, and strength of this man repelled her; he was as powerful as Augustus and far more healthy; he sat his horse like a creature of steel and iron, at one with the magnificent creature he rode in power and purpose.

No passions had ever marked his face, which expressed nothing but an unfeeling calm and complete courage.

It would be impossible to believe that that countenance could ever look on the thing it feared.

Aurora sighed; in her heart she admitted that she had never dealt yet with a man of that quality; it would be the greater triumph to make him swerve, if only for a second, from his inhuman fortitude.

The next time the King of Sweden went abroad he found himself some miles from the village, and in a narrow road face to face with a horse-woman who took off her traveling mask and revealed the lovely features of Aurora von Königsmarck. "Now will you speak to me, sire?" she asked gravely, almost coldly.

At least he looked at her; she directly barred his path and he could not have turned, as he had done before, without glancing at her; his steady blue eyes stared at her with calm repugnance.

She was wrapped in a heavy white horseman's cloak, with gray fur gauntlets and a black beaver hat; her bright curls fell into the heavy folds of the cloth, and her face looked pale and delicate as a snowdrop above her winter attire; she rode a fine black horse, and her saddle and harness were ornamented, in the Polish fashion, with brilliant colors of red, yellow, and blue.

"I am Aurora von Königsmarck," she added, in the same tone; her soft eyes were steady as those that gazed at her so coldly.

"Madame, I recognized you—there is no other lady would trouble to set herself in my path," replied the King.

"Your Majesty is greatly to be feared and greatly to be admired," said Aurora. "Do you not wonder at my courage in venturing to address you, sire?"

"You consider yourself invincible, Countess," he replied, "therefore your courage is only a sense of security."

She was studying him eagerly under the broad lids that drooped so indifferently over her brilliant eyes; her purpose had gone into the background of her mind; she was not thinking of him as the King of Sweden who held the fate of her master in his hand, but as a man who might or might not be won, and she noted his size, his fairness, the severity of his dress, his curious face, his colorless voice with a growing sense of antipathy and hopelessness.

"I only ask for the charity of a few words speech," she said in French, and then she recalled that though he was acquainted with that language he obstinately refused to speak it, and she added hastily in Swedish, "Will you not hear me, sire, a few moments?"

He checked his horse that pawed the ground impatient to proceed, and gave Aurora a chilling look.

"On what subject should you have to speak to me?" he demanded.

The Countess flushed, for all her self-command; she would liked to have given him a glance as freezing as his own, and have ridden away before he did so; she hated him for the disadvantage she was at—obliged to conduct this interview on horseback, muffled in a heavy mantle, in the open air and keen cold, half her graces concealed, half her charms useless.

"Has your Majesty's success and glory taught you only to be cruel to the unfortunate?" she asked, with a quiver in her voice.

"On what matter could you have to speak to me?" repeated the King; he gave a short unexpected laugh, and she was startled to see how it spoilt and rendered unpleasant his handsome face. Aurora's hand was forced.

"I come from the King of Poland," she said, with dignity.

"You could not come on a more hopeless errand, then," he replied. "I discuss no politics with women, Countess."

"I am more in the King of Poland's confidence than any of his ministers," she declared boldly.

"That," he said curtly, "is well known."

Aurora controlled herself, but her hands shook on the reins; never had she been treated so boorishly by any man.

"I come on a mission so delicate there was no one else could have been trusted with it," she answered. "You, sire, are not rendering my task pleasant to me."

"Therefore I would have avoided you, Madame," said Karl.

"I have been trusted by King Augustus with this mission——"

A look of scorn flashed over the Swede's impassive face.

"Does Augustus think I shall find you dangerous? Believe me, I do not."

Aurora quivered under the calm insult; all her weapons seemed powerless before the freezing indifference of this boy; she felt as at a loss as any inexperienced girl might have done.

"Augustus offers peace," she said desperately, almost choking over the words. "Augustus begs for peace."

Karl's proud eyes gleamed for a second, and his full lips curled.

"Madame," he replied, "I will discuss peace in Varsovia."

Before this implacable front Aurora shrank; he meant then to take the capital?

She knew that Augustus could not defend Varsovia, and her quick mind foresaw the last misery of a flight to Saxony; she was quite aware that the Poles would probably tolerate Karl at least as peacefully as they did Augustus, and that the latter's chances of retaining the crown were indeed desperate.

"Nay," she said faintly, flinging back her head with a womanish gesture, and holding out one little hand, from which she had stripped the heavy glove, in an attitude of appeal. "Can one so great be so hard to the fallen?"

This was not the kind of compliment that flattered the iron pride of Karl; it always irritated him that anyone should believe him capable of being moved by fulsome flattery, and it was his particular weakness to consider himself impervious to the wiles of man or woman.

"Your horse will take cold, Madame," he said. "I give you good day."

He saluted and was turning away; Aurora thought

of her last card that was to have been played in such a different manner, with so much more of finesse and address.

"I was empowered to treat on the subject of—General Patkul," she stammered.

At that name Karl did stop and turn his head; he seemed amazed and almost as if about to be betrayed into passionate speech, but he controlled himself.

"Would Augustus surrender Patkul?" he asked, in a curious tone.

Aurora could not answer; she felt as if she had committed an incredible baseness.

"He would, eh?" added Karl, with a look that was like a blow in the face to the proud woman to whom it was directed.

"So that is your errand?" continued the King, still fixing her with a hard and merciless stare that became increasingly contemptuous.

"I have not stated my errand," replied Aurora; her eyes flashed to meet his and the blood stained her face. "From the manner in which your Majesty treats a woman, I do not think you would be tender with a rebel—need we therefore be so nice in discussing General Patkul?"

"It is not in my nature to be tender," said the King, with his ugly smile. "I shall not be merciful either with Patkul nor yet with Augustus of Saxony."

"Your Majesty makes a boast of cruelty, then? I had hoped one of your nobleness would have been satisfied by having your enemy your supplicant."

Her bosom heaved beneath the rough mantle and her face was beautiful in her sincere indignation, flushed and vivid with feeling and emotion; but she might have been a hag for all the effect she had on Karl of Sweden.

"Peace in Varsovia, Madame," he repeated sternly, and turned and galloped away down the frosty road, this time without a salutation.

Aurora gazed after the disappearing figure with eyes

dimmed by tears of passionate rage; she was cold and trembling, never had she believed herself capable of any passion as strong as the hatred now inspired in her haughty heart by this young man.

"A herol!" she thought, "a boorish boy! a rude churl!"

Slowly she turned back to her lodging; useless to expose herself to further mortification—it would be only to repeat her failure, only to madden herself for nothing.

She must return to Varsovia and tell Augustus of her humiliation.

The future appeared to her desperate; she did not even care to think of it; this adamant and implacable prince clearly meant to conquer both Poland and Saxony.

Aurora saw her whole world tumbling into the dust of chaos; this man would be the master of her fate; and she could do nothing with him; he had looked at her with—first indifference, then contempt, and always as if she had been old and ugly.

In Augustus she had no hope; she knew that he was at the end of his resources, and he had no personal qualities with which to inspire confidence; she foresaw that his bewildered policies would lead to a total overthrow of his fortunes, and that his submission would partake of the nature of panic and thereby further gild the triumph of Karl.

She felt angry with her lover for the failure that had placed her in such a position of unendurable humiliation and insecurity.

In her bitterness, as she rode slowly along the hard lonely road, the cold skies above her and the unawakened landscape barren and still frozen about her, her dominant thought was a regret, almost passionate regret, that she had not attached her fortunes to those of a more successful man than Augustus of Saxony.

CHAPTER IV

THE unhappy Augustus went swiftly on the path of disaster; when Aurora von Königsmarck failed and returned making the best she could of a poor tale, the King-Elector appealed to the Diet still sitting at Varsovia, by means of one of his partisans, the Palatine of Marienbourg.

He asked that the army of Poland might be placed at his disposition, promising to pay the men two quarters in advance, and requested permission to bring to the defense of the country 12,000 Saxons.

Cardinal Radziekowski, Archbishop of Gnesne, Prime Minister of the Realm, and President of the Diet, the most powerful enemy of Augustus, and the most active partisan of the Sobieski, the family of the last King of Poland, was eager enough to seize this opportunity of insulting a king elected against his wish and who was an object of his keen personal dislike; the answer he returned to the Palatine of Marienbourg was dry and hard.

"His Majesty was advised not to bring any Saxons into Poland as the Diet was on the point of sending an embassy to the King of Sweden."

In this extremity Augustus resolved to throw himself once more on the mercy of Karl; he privately sent a chamberlain to the Swedish camp to inquire how and where the conqueror would receive an envoy from himself and from Poland.

This secret ambassador suffered an even severer reception than that which had been accorded to the Countess von Königsmarck; as the formality of the passport had been overlooked Karl put the chamber-

lain in prison without seeing him, declaring that while he might listen to the Republic he would not hear anything from King Augustus.

The only consolation that this unfortunate prince had in his disasters was that of seeing that the Republic was treated almost as harshly as himself.

Karl received the five senators sent by the Diet in his tent near Grodno, with a pomp that was unusual to him—surrounded by his dragoons and generals, seated on a throne, and clad in a rich uniform with damascened cuirass; but the two spokesmen, Tarlo and Galesky, could, after all, only obtain from him the sentence with which he had sent away Aurora von Königsmarck that he would “discuss peace in Varsovia.”

Flooding the country with manifestos, in which he declared that his cause was identical with that of Poland, and that his arms were directed solely against the Saxon, Karl marched on the capital.

His propaganda was insidiously aided by the Cardinal Primate, and by those numerous senators who were either secretly of his interest or actively opposed to Augustus, who remained abandoned by all save the few nobles who were of his party and the envoys of Peter, the Pope, and the Emperor. His orders to the Polish nobility to take arms with their followers and come to his assistance were ignored while the Poles hesitated, watching with more satisfaction than dismay, the daily advance of the conqueror.

Even those senators loyal to Augustus would not consent to his calling in his Saxons, but he had secretly commanded the 12,000 he had asked for to advance to his aid, and had recalled another 8000 that he had promised to the Emperor to use against France.

He knew that to do this was to violate the Polish law that did not allow him more than 10,000 foreign troops, and that he was risking a revolt throughout the country, but his necessity was desperate, and he believed that he had now little to lose in Poland.

While he was waiting for the arrival of these troops he left Varsovia and went from one Palatinate of Poland to the other, endeavoring to secure the nobility on his behalf, and to raise some sort of an army with which to face the conqueror. Meanwhile, Karl arrived before Varsovia, which, not fortified and without a garrison, opened her gates at once.

The victor contented himself with disarming the citizens and exacting the moderate tribute of 100,000 francs.

Among the first to present himself before the Swedish King was Cardinal Radziekowski, who had left Varsovia to withdraw to his residence at Lowitz.

Karl received him, without pomp or ceremony, in his headquarters, which he had established at Praga, near the capital.

The Cardinal Primate looked at this youthful hero with a curiosity equal to that with which Aurora von Königsmarck had first gazed at him, and with the same desperate desire and eager hope to turn him to his own ends.

These ends were directly in opposition to those of the fair Countess; he labored to overthrow the crown she wished at all costs to preserve. Karl was standing with his brother-in-law, Count Piper, and several generals, distinguished from the others by his height and the plainness of his attire; he wore his heavy blue cloth coat with gilt leather buttons, black satin cravat, white breeches, high boots, and leather gloves that came to the elbows; he had his hair short, in contrast to the flowing perukes of the other gentlemen, and his still beardless face was browned above his fair proper complexion. He advanced to meet the Cardinal with an air of friendliness, but there was but little change in his cold countenance and the steady gleam of his blue eyes.

The Cardinal felt chilled, and faltered a little in the high-flown compliments that he had prepared to salute the conqueror.

"You have come to speak of peace?" asked Karl, cutting short his speech.

"Your Majesty," replied the Cardinal, with some difficulty, rallying his wits in face of this personality so unusual and so unexpected, "Your Majesty promised peace in Varsovia."

"I promised to discuss peace in Varsovia," replied the young conqueror, "and I shall keep my word."

The Cardinal bowed his head; it was difficult to know what to say before such imperious abruptness.

"Your Eminence represents Poland?" added Karl.

"All save that portion that remains with King Augustus," replied the cautious priest.

"You are of the Sobieski party?" demanded the King.

"Sire, I have striven to be of no party, but the servant of Poland."

Karl smiled; he was tolerably well acquainted with the intrigues and factions of the Republic, and, though he disdained politics, on this occasion he had allowed Count Piper to meddle in the affairs of Poland, greatly to his own advantage. He glanced at the Duke of Holstein-Gottorp.

"We have not come to impose terms on Poland, have we?" he said briefly, then turned again to the Cardinal without waiting for the young Duke's assent. "My quarrel is not with Poland."

"We are, indeed," replied the Cardinal, with some dignity, "unconscious of any offense towards your Majesty."

"But your King," said Karl, "waged on me a most unjust and aggressive war. He must make reparation."

"Sire," answered the Cardinal, with secret exultation, "he is in no condition to refuse your Majesty's terms."

"We have not yet come to the discussion of my terms," responded the King, with an increase of his freezing hauteur. "If your Eminence is the mouth-piece of your country—I have only this to say—that I will give Poland peace when she has elected another King."

No words could have been more grateful to Cardinal Radziekowski, who was the adherent of the Sobieski, and the man who had, in default of James Sobieski, rendered too unpopular by the memory of his father's faults to be a possible candidate for the Polish throne, caused the Prince of Conti to be elected, and would have crowned him but for the power of Saxon arms and Saxon money.

"You may tell, sir, your palatines and nobles this news," added Karl curtly. "If they require peace they know the means by which they can attain it."

He moved away in a manner which seemed to terminate the interview that had not lasted more than a few moments; but the Cardinal Primate hardly noticed the abruptness of his dismissal in his satisfaction at the news he could now carry all over Poland, with a fair certainty of dethroning Augustus.

"This priest," remarked Karl to his brother-in-law, "will save us much trouble. The Poles will themselves cast off the Saxon."

He looked as he spoke at one of the officers who had remained in the window-place during his interview with the Cardinal.

This was a young man of a frank and pleasing countenance and attired very richly, Stanislaus Leczinski, Palatine of Posen, and one of the first Poles to join Sweden; his behavior was stained by some ingratitude towards Augustus, to whom he owed his fortune, but whose election he had opposed on the ground that no foreigner should rule over Poland.

Karl had already shown a marked interest in this young man, who was in most things more youthful than himself though eight years his senior.

It pleased his peculiar pride to give his friendship to one who could in no wise requite it; and just because Stanislaus had little influence in Poland and could be of no assistance worth considering to Karl, that monarch favored him above the Sobieski and Sapieha whose power might have been of immense

service to him; Stanislaus had held the office of treasurer under Augustus, but had little weight in politics beyond that given by eloquence and hardihood.

It was to this young noble who had so early reported himself at the camp of the victor to whom Karl now addressed himself.

"Do you not think," he asked keenly, "that Augustus will soon be dethroned?"

"I think, sire, that he will, when he is desperate, fight," replied Stanislaus. "When the Cardinal Primate make public your Majesty's ultimatum, the Elector will make an effort to redeem his fortunes."

"I hope so," said Karl dryly; "he needs a further lesson. Is he not now at Cracovia?"

It was Count Piper who answered.

"The last advices are, sire, that he has gathered the nobility of that province about him, and awaits the arrival of the Saxon troops."

"We will advance on Cracovia," said Karl calmly, "and when we have taken that city, we will decide the question of the crown of Poland."

With these words, spoken too dryly to savour of pomp or bombast, Karl smiled at the young Palatine of Posen, and left the room with a brief salute to the others.

"He will make himself King of Poland," said Stanislaus Leczinski, as the door closed.

"He will not," answered Count Piper, with a touch of sarcasm in his voice. "That would be too ordinary an exploit to please His Majesty's temper."

"What can he do more astonishing or more magnificent than to take a crown from his enemy's brow to place on his own!" exclaimed the young Palatine, turning his frank, pleasant face towards the Swede. "And I for the first," he added, with genuine admiration in his voice, "would be ready to acclaim him in the greatness that he has so nobly won."

"You do not know the King," said Count Piper

dryly. "His pride is to be the arbiter of other men's destinies—he would not consider himself made greater by another crown; his is a lofty pride, and a strict if hard code of honor; he would disdain to turn a defensive and punitive war into one of conquest. You will see that, as in the treaty with Denmark, he will ask nothing for himself—unless it be one thing."

"And that?" asked Stanislaus.

"John Rheingold Patkul."

"The Czar's envoy!"

"To Karl a rebel—and undoubtedly the Livonian was the arch-conspirator in this plot to despoil Sweden."

Stanislaus did not reply; his secret sympathies were with Patkul, whom he believed to be sincerely working for his own oppressed country, but his interest and his admiration lay with Karl; the strange figure of the young conqueror fascinated his chivalrous and ardent nature, and he had been flattered by the notice of so remarkable a man.

His wish to see Karl King of Poland was sincere; this was the type of king he desired for a country to which he was attached with a strong affection; he had never liked the indolent good-natured Saxon.

"Naturally," added Count Piper, with a glance at the Swedish officers, "I shall do my utmost to persuade His Majesty to accept the crown of Poland if it is offered to him; it would be a safe, sound step that would bring Sweden some return for the expense of this war—but the King," he added with meaning, "is not likely to take my advice."

The Palatine did not think any the worse of Karl for this; he was headstrong and independent himself, and could appreciate that a man in the position of intoxicating glory occupied by the King of Sweden would refuse to be led by the advice of a mere politician.

"Perhaps," he said, with his native pleasantness, "we may be able to move His Majesty to our wishes."

Smiling, he picked up his gaily-feathered hat, and went

out to find the King who he knew at this hour would be taking one of his lonely rides round Praga.

The action of Augustus was exactly that predicted by Stanislaus Leczinski.

When the Cardinal Primate informed the Diet that it was necessary to bow to the will of the conqueror and dethrone the Elector of Saxony, that Prince resolved on a desperate battle for his kingdom, and advanced to meet Karl who was marching from Varsovia, the new capital, to Cracovia, the ancient capital which had been chosen as the Saxon headquarters.

Karl had 12,000 men, picked Swedish troops; Augustus, his own soldiers having arrived, had 30,000, of whom 20,000 were those that had lately arrived from his own electorate, and the rest the Poles who had remained faithful to him during his reverses.

In numbers he was therefore greatly superior to the King of Sweden, and the Saxons were as well equipped, armed, and trained as the Swedes, but such was the respect inspired by the invincible Karl that Augustus went to meet his fate with a heavy heart.

"Why does the Czar do nothing?" asked Aurora passionately, when her lover took leave of her.

"What of his hordes of Muscovites?" she added.

Augustus smiled sadly.

"Those troops he has sent I should be better without," he replied. "Peter trains his men—I know not when he will be ready. Think not of aid from him, dear heart."

The proud-hearted woman clasped her fair arms round his bravery of satin and steel, and raised her sad countenance to the kind handsome face that looked at her so tenderly.

But no words of love or softness left her beautiful lips.

"If you do not defeat the King of Sweden, I think that I shall never forgive you," she said fiercely.

Augustus, harassed, perplexed, and overwhelmed, took leave of her with less than his usual affection.

Hélène D'Einsiedel gave him a gentler "God-speed," while she thanked God in her heart that Patkul was in Russia; far away, but safe from the approaching horror of battle, thought the poor girl, as she watched the army leave Cracovia.

In a few days came the news that Augustus had met Karl at Klissow, and that despite a desperate resistance and heroic bravery, had suffered a complete reverse, his stores, flags, artillery, falling into the hands of the Swedes who drove him before them in headlong flight.

Karl entered Cracovia as he had entered Varsovia, overwhelmed all by the sheer terror of his arms, established a Swedish garrison, taxed the town 100,000 rix-dollars, and proceeded to follow Augustus who fled towards Marienbourg.

Livid with anger and despair Aurora von Königs-marck had rushed from room to room of the palace, snatching her jewels, her gold and silver ornaments, her tapestries and clothes, calling together her maids, pages, dogs, and monkeys, and in hasty retreat with coaches and baggage-mules, fled to Lublin, accompanied by Mdle. D'Einsiedel, whose entire being was occupied in prayers for the safety of General Patkul.

When the weary women reached their new place of refuge they were relieved by the news that Augustus had a respite.

Karl, hotly pursuing his enemy, had fallen from his horse and broken his leg, which necessitated his return to Cracovia and would keep him confined several weeks to his bed.

"Now—if you have a man's courage and a prince's spirit—is your opportunity," wrote Aurora, in a fiery letter to the vanquished Prince, who was striving to gather together once more his resources at Marienbourg.

BOOK V

THE ELECTOR AUGUSTUS

"Victrices copias aliam laturus in orbem."—LUCAN.

CHAPTER I

THE Czar Peter listened in silence to the news from Poland; he had appeared lately to have forgotten the war, and to have become entirely absorbed in the building of his new city and fort on the mud-banks of the Neva.

Anxious to break the spirit of the Malo-Russians who had shown themselves restive under his autocratic rule, he had transported thousands of these men whose forced labor was draining the morass as a preliminary to the foundations of the new city.

That hundreds of them died through the unhealthfulness of the district and the hard conditions of their life was nothing to the Czar.

He had decided that the new capital was to be called St. Petersburg, and that the great fortress therein was to be named St. Peter and St. Paul and used for the burial-place of the Czars of Russia, instead of the church of St. Michael in Moscow.

When General Patkul joined his master at the little house called Marli, he found, to his great disappointment, that Peter exhibited a moody indifference with regard to the war and the astonishing conquests of Karl XII.

He was now often in his carpenter's shed dressed like a Dutch skipper, and working with his hands.

"Karl could not do this," he said one day to Patkul, who was surveying his occupation with some dismay.

"Do what, sire?" asked the Livonian.

Peter touched the planes and lathes on the carpenter's bench.

"This," he said. "No, he could not turn a table-leg—nor found a city."

"He can conquer kingdoms," said Patkul bitterly enough.

Peter leant back against the rough wall of the shed; his short, soft, dusky curls were hanging over his eyes; his expressive charming face was pale and tired; his large dark eyes full of a veiled fire; his blue blouse was open on a fine cambric shirt (he was always very nice in his linen) and his breeches and woolen stockings were covered with sawdust and chips of wood.

He looked at Patkul kindly.

"Do you think that what that man does will endure?" he asked.

"Conquests have endured, sire, nations have been enslaved for generations through the exploits of a man like this."

The Czar was not thinking of the freedom of future generations; he meant to build a great nation, not a free one.

"Sweden can never hold the Baltic Provinces," he replied.

"Who is to prevent him?"

"I shall," said Peter.

Patkul looked earnestly at the Czar, as if to discover if he spoke in jest or earnest.

"Well," added Peter, with narrowed eyes and signs of a rising temper. "Do you not think I shall yet utterly crush the Swede? I have had my lesson, Patkul."

He seized a knife and stabbed moodily at the carpenter's bench before him.

"Your Majesty has the genius to profit by it," said Patkul gravely.

"All my battles are not going to be like Narva," continued the Czar. "I have learnt something of war. The King of Poland is a fool. Why did he not train my Muscovites?"

"He told me, sire, that he had no officers, and complained that the Russians were out of hand and ravaging Lithuania."

"I hope they may lay it waste from end to end," said Peter. "At the same time, if any ever return to Russia, I will have them knouted for disobedience."

He frowned as he thought of Augustus, a character that intensely irritated him; the elegant splendid Elector and the savage Czar had been only able to tolerate each other when both had been intoxicated; only in debauchery had they anything in common.

"He is a fool," repeated the Czar. "If he had kept to the treaty of Birsén, Karl would have been ruined by now."

"He lacked both money and means," said Patkul, who had a certain friendship for Augustus, and a clear understanding of his difficulties.

"I think, sire, you can hardly conceive how he was, and is, hampered by the Polish Diet and families like the Sapieha."

"He should punish them all. Had I been King of Poland, by now there would not be a rebel left," answered Peter gloomily. "What is the merit of governing if one cannot overcome opposition?"

Patkul remembered the fate of the Strelitz who had ventured to oppose the Czar's innovations, and the vengeance he had taken on his own wife and sister; certainly Peter knew how to make himself both feared and obeyed.

"Poland is in reality a Republic," said the Livonian, "and Augustus is not free, even to punish."

"Ah, Poland!" exclaimed the Czar impatiently.

"What matter the laws and constitution of Poland? She can be dismembered as easily as that," and he pulled apart a piece of wood he had snatched up in his strong fingers.

"The King of Sweden may take the crown of Poland," said Patkul, thinking to rouse the Czar.

"And invade Saxony, and frighten the Elector's fiddlers and dainty ladies!" laughed Peter.

"And invade Russia, sire."

Peter rose.

"That is his design?"

"I am sure of it."

"Well, we have a little time in which to drill our armies."

"Sire, not so long."

Peter smiled; he still did not seem greatly stirred by the account of the exploits of Karl.

"Is he not at Cracovia with a broken leg, eh, Patkul?"

"He mends fast; he is a creature of iron, and, once he is in the field again, Augustus will be driven before him as he was before."

"Curse the Saxon," exclaimed Peter, with sudden violence. "Had I faced Karl with 20,000 trained troops I had sent this Swede reeling backwards in his tracks!"

He spoke with a passion and a simple grandeur that warmed Patkul's heart with some glimmerings of hope, unlikely as it seemed to him that out of the chaos that was Russia even Peter could raise an army that would overthrow the Swede, before whose arms the finest troops in Europe had broken.

"Klissow was extraordinary, sire," he said. "The Saxons had never a chance——"

"And the Poles?"

"They broke and fled at the first cannonade."

Peter made an impatient gesture.

"And Augustus still thinks to raise an army from these materials?"

"He is at Lublin or Marienbourg, sire, endeavoring to rouse the Palatinates."

"Oh, he had better return to Dresden and amuse himself with his toes," said Peter contemptuously.

"Karl would not leave him in peace, even in Dresden."

"He will grovel?" asked Peter.

"I think he will," replied Patkul. "He sent the Countess von Königsmarck to make terms. I know this, although the matter was kept secret."

"A fribble and a fool!" cried Peter. "Have I ever had a chance, Patkul, with two such allies? This Saxon weakling — and Denmark, what does Denmark do?"

"He maintains a prudent silence, sire, and respects the treaty he dare not break."

"A couple of dogs, of spiritless dogs!" said Peter fiercely. "But I, my friend, do not need either of them. The issue lies between Sweden and me."

He paused, and fixed his dark powerful glance on the slight, energetic figure and resolute face of his general.

"Do you think," he asked, in a quiter tone, "that this man's work is to be compared to mine? I construct—he destroys. Is it easier to knock down a house with cannon or to build it up, carefully, brick by brick, with your own proper hands? And which is the more useful to mankind? I make Russia and Karl destroys Sweden."

"But these conquests will enrich—as did those of the great Gustavus."

"Nay, he does not fight for trade, for liberty, for the advancement of his people—for forts or markets, but for the empty fame of armies; he drains Sweden of men and money—to the point of exhaustion—for what? That he may make Europe stare at barren conquests."

Peter, roused, as was his capricious manner, suddenly from a gloomy indifference to a deep enthusiasm

—from melancholia, almost despair, to firm self-reliance and confidence—spoke with a power and a force that encouraged as it impressed Patkul, who hailed the man of genius and the great ruler in this young man in the peasant's blouse who paced amid the litter of a workman's shed; would to God, he thought, the Czar could always have his faith in himself, this clear outlook, this patience and calm judgment.

"All these lands will belong to Holy Russia," continued the Czar. "Aye, and Poland too; his glory shall vanish, leaving but a name for children's tales. I shall leave a power that will fight the world."

He smiled, mournfully, almost tenderly, at Patkul.

"Are you dismayed at the progress of this Swede?" he asked, "and at my inaction? Do you think I show poorly beside his glory?"

He stepped up to the Livonian and laid a hand on the sleeve of his rich uniform.

"Look you, Patkul," he said, with a noble air far removed from boasting, "he takes Varsovia and Cracovia—but I built St. Petersburg! He sets his heel on Poland, I give my hand to Russia, and raise her up—a nation among nations."

Patkul was both moved and comforted.

"Ah, sire, would that you were always in this mood!"

A shadow passed over the Czar's expressive face.

"Sometimes the devils get hold of me," he muttered, "and nothing on earth seems real. When this war is over, I shall travel again. I should have seen Venice," he added, irrelevantly, "had not that rebellion of the Strelitz called me back—think, a city on the sea! I, too, will have my city on the sea. A pity that Gordon died—he was a good man, a keen soldier, a faithful envoy. Poor Gordon, but I gave him a fine funeral."

"Your Majesty is as well served now," said Patkul gently.

"I know," replied Peter warmly and affectionately.

"And those who serve me well shall be well rewarded."

"Your Majesty's success would reward me sufficiently," said the Livonian simply. "Could I see the Swede defeated and my country freed——"

Peter interrupted.

"If you do not go down in these wars you will see Sweden ruined. As for your country—I shall be an easier master than Karl, if only because of my friendship to you," he added, with a smile.

With this Patkul had to be contented, nay, grateful; perhaps in his innermost heart was a misgiving that Peter might prove as stern a tryant as ever Karl or his father had been; he admired the Czar, he was fond of him, but he had not been able to deceive himself as to the terrible aspects of Peter's character; he knew of his excesses, his cruelties, his fierce vengeance; it might have occurred to him that he was but devoting his life to rescue his unfortunate country from one master to place her under another, and that there could not be much liberty under the autocratic rule of Peter, but he trusted, with something of the faith of desperation, in the Czar's love of progress and enlightenment, and hoped that a man so remarkable would by degrees reform himself as he reformed others.

There was, however, a shadow on his pleasant expressive face as Peter pronounced these words that referred to the future fate of his beloved Livonia.

The searching, though wild and mournful gaze of the Czar noted the shade that clouded the ardor of his general's look.

"Patkul," he said, "*believe in me.*"

The Livonian eagerly seized and eagerly pressed to his lips the work-worn hand of the Czar.

"Did I not believe in you, sire, I could not live," he said quietly, but with intense feeling.

Peter smiled.

"Come into the house," he answered.

The two men, the Czar in his workman's apparel

and Patkul in the splendid uniform of a Russian soldier, entered the little house called Marli.

In the room on the ground floor a meal was laid, roughly, yet many of the articles were of carved gold and beaten silver.

By the window where the late lilacs hung their blossoms from their thicket of close-packed leaves against the casement, Patkul saw his country-woman, now no longer Marpha, but baptized into the Orthodox Church by the name of Katherina.

She wore a handsome Russian dress of green velvet and orange-colored silk, both embroidered with gold; a long white gauze veil with a pearl edging hung from her stiff satin head-dress.

She was seated in a clumsy attitude, eating sweetmeats; neither her hands nor her face were clean, and already prosperity, idleness, and good-living were coarsening and spoiling her opulent beauty.

Patkul, looking at her, marveled at Peter; he was used to the refined loveliness of women like Aurora von Königsmarck, and to a court where women such as the Livonian would not have been tolerated as chambermaids.

Prince Mentchikoff entered, very splendid in European clothes, with a great curling peruke and a star on his breast, and looking very much like a courtier of King Louis.

Peter eyed him with satisfaction.

"My Lord Carmarthen had such a coat as that," he said, fingering the skirts of heavy gray silk. "Do you remember, Danilovitch, what a fine gentleman he was? I should like to see him again—and his boat—that was a fine boat, Danilovitch."

"When the war is over we will go again to England," replied Mentchikoff. "They are the most sensible people in the world, and live in the most comfortable fashion."

"Yet in too confined and precise a way," returned Peter. "Nothing is to be changed or upset or altered."

"Having achieved a fortunate constitution, under which it is a happiness to live," said Patkul, "they are jealous to preserve it, and this temper shows in small things."

The Tartar servant brought in the dinner; several kinds of drink, kvas, and pungent liquors, boiled cabbage and beetroot, pickled cucumbers and a great dish of parboiled fish, another of stewed meat.

The four took their places.

Katherina smiled pleasantly and placidly at every one; her breath already smelt of brandy, and she began drinking before she ate; her finery was stained with grease, for she was as often as not in the kitchen among the pots, and stale sugar disfigured her veil.

Patkul sat opposite to her, and his glance rested puzzled on this woman who had so entirely fascinated a man like Peter—perhaps the greatest man in Europe.

She accompanied him everywhere he went now; it was believed that he was going to marry her, even to make her his Empress if he could divorce Eudoxia; she was his confidante, and it was said, his adviser, in everything.

Her birth and breed made her sympathize with his schemes for a reform that would humiliate the nobility, and with the abolition of customs and conventions that made her own extraordinary elevation possible; like Mentchikoff, she was in favor of a new Russia where she could find her own fortunes; unlike him, no motives of patriotism, no appreciation what the task Peter was endeavoring to perform, mingled with her satisfaction at her personal good luck.

She was fond of the Czar; she had been as fond of Mentchikoff; she was ready to be as fond of any man whom it was her interest to serve; but as she could look no higher than Peter, her placid affections had concentrated on him; she was in many ways a remarkable woman, shrewd, well-balanced, quick and courageous; but it was difficult to know wherein Peter

found the supreme attraction that caused him to be inseparable from her unless it was the immovable good nature and placid, healthy calm that took all his melancholies and caprices with a smile.

Patkul contrasted her in his mind with Hélène D'Einsiedel, so fair and soft and gentle; she seemed in his memory like a creature of another world, and his heart contracted with a sense of bitter loss as he recalled how she had come to him through the dark, snowy streets of Varsovia and placed her cold hands in his and offered him her chill lips in a mute sorrow of farewell.

And he had let her go, because he had shrunk from bringing her to Russia, among such company as the Czar kept.

But was she any happier now, in flight before the conqueror, and in what way, save for outward grossness, was Katherina worse than Aurora von Königs-marck, who pandered to a worse man, and exacted a higher price than did this peasant. While he was asking himself, with some bitterness, these questions, Peter, hitherto absorbed in his food, suddenly spoke:

"I shall keep you here, Patkul, Saxony is not worth your pains."

The General flushed and started, the words came so pat on his reflections.

"I wish to return, sire," he said.

"Why?" asked Peter, with a certain annoyance, but Katherina good-humoredly interfered.

"Why, let him go—his lady is there."

Peter gave him a keen glance.

"You are safer in Russia," he said. "Never trust a weakling," he added shrewdly.

"Sire," replied the Livonian, "as your envoy I am safe anywhere."

"Never trust a weakling," repeated the Czar.

But Patkul was resolute to return to Saxony.

CHAPTER II

AUGUSTUS, with more energy than might have been expected from his easy nature, set himself to redeem the disaster of Klissow.

Having taken advantage of the accident of Karl to spread the news of his death, he summoned a convocation of the Polish nobles, and in the reaction occasioned by the belief in the death of the terrible captain, Augustus, by promises, smiles, and largesses, gained the support of many of the Palatinates, who were only hesitating as to which was the winning side.

The Cardinal Primate himself, who had been so eager to point out to the Diet the necessity of dethroning Augustus to placate Karl, came to Lublin and took, with the other magnates, the oath of allegiance to the Elector.

A fresh army of 50,000 was raised before it became known that Karl was alive, and even in the face of this news it was voted that six weeks be given to the Swedes in which to declare their terms for peace or war, and the same time to the rebel Sapieha of Lithuania, in which to lay down their arms.

Meanwhile Peter showed signs of coming to his ally's assistance when Augustus had despaired of help from that quarter; moved by the energy and eloquence of Patkul, the Czar sent that General to put some spirit into the wandering Muscovite troops in Lithuania and Ingria, and these, reduced to some order and discipline by the efforts of the gallant Livonian, began to make vigorous attacks on the garrisons the King of Sweden had left behind in the conquered Provinces; and even Karl's veteran troops admitted that the Muscovites were

not so entirely to be despised as they had been led to believe by Narva.

Count Piper saw his master's glory stationary if not dimmed.

He did not urge the King to seize this moment to conclude a favorable peace, having already proved the uselessness of such advice; but he represented to him, as coldly as possible, that the renown won by his arms might suffer by his entry into the confused field of Polish politics, his meddling with intrigues so involved as to be hardly understandable by a foreigner.

"While your Majesty waits to dethrone the King of Poland, Muscovy grows stronger."

"After Poland, Russia," replied Karl from the bed where he lay confined with his broken leg. "But I shall dethrone Augustus if I stay here fifty years."

And despite the advices of his generals he continued to support the Diet of Varsovia, which, acting in opposition to that of Lublin, had been called together by the intrigues of the Cardinal Primate, and endeavored to give expediency an air of decency by searching the laws for justification for actions sufficiently indicated by necessity, and so giving a glow of dignity to the submissions exacted by the conqueror.

Karl, whose sole amusement was hearing the Scandinavian sagas read to him, and who bore his enforced idleness, so bitter to one of his active spirit, without either irritation or lament, had received greatly into his friendship the young Palatine of Posen, whose chivalrous spirit, high courage, and honorable character were pleasing to Karl's code of manhood. His brother-in-law, the Duke of Holstein-Gottorp, had been killed at the battle of Klissow (thus in reality rendering null the object of the war, which was to restore this prince to his domains), and the stern young King had no companion of his own age beyond this Polish noble.

Stanislaus, frank, affable, and generous, neither presumed on nor cringed for Karl's favor, and cherished

no ulterior designs; he was content to see his country delivered from Saxon rule and hoped nothing for himself from Karl's conquests.

The Elector's gleam of prosperity was short-lived. As soon as Karl could mount his horse he advanced on the remnants of the Saxon army who, in this brief breathing space, had rallied from their defeat at Klissow.

Gyllenstierna had sent from Sweden troops to the number of over 10,000 of whom 6000 were cavalry, and twenty pieces of cannon.

The Saxons, under Steinau, fell back on Russia. Karl pursued them, and, swimming the river Bug at the head of his cavalry, fell on them at Pultask and utterly defeated them, Steinau and his staff being among the fugitives; then they marched on Thorn on the Vistula, where they again defeated Augustus had taken refuge, and proceeded to besiege the town.

The desperate Elector contrived to escape from the beleaguered garrison and retired towards Saxony.

Karl was now master of Poland; General Rehnsköld with one division of the army holding the center of the country, the frontiers of Russia being guarded by other army corps, and Karl, with the flower of his troops, camped a few miles outside Thorn.

Nothing disturbed his glory which seemed now at the apogee; Denmark respected the treaty at Traventhal and accepted in silence the near approach of his hereditary enemy to its frontiers; Swedish ships were in possession of the Baltic seas; and the arms of Karl threatened at once Saxony, the Empire, and Russia.

North Europe awaited in silence the next step of this conqueror who, as soon as his transports with reinforcements had arrived from Sweden, proceeded to close round the imperial town of Thorn.

After a splendid resistance the city capitulated on the third of October; Karl made a display of generosity by his munificence and courtesy towards Röbel, the heroic governor, and one of meanness by taxing the town, already ruined by the war, far more than it could

afford to pay; it was becoming more and more apparent that this King cared for little but war, and knew not how to appreciate any but military merit.

Dantzic and Ebling, two free and imperial towns on the Vistula, having been too nice in granting consent to the passage of the Swedish reinforcements, were soon made to feel the terror of the conqueror's arms, Dantzic being forced to pay a heavy fine and Ebling being entered by the Swedes, soldiers quartered with the burghers, cannon packed in the squares, and the inhabitants reduced to throw themselves on their knees in the streets before his triumphal entry imploring mercy.

Karl mulcted the town in a large sum, seized her arms, and left a garrison there, proceeding, with unmoved grandeur, on his implacable conquests.

The intrigues of the Cardinal Primate, waxing bolder as the fortunes of Augustus waned, succeeded in inducing the Diet to declare the Elector of Saxony incapable of wearing the crown of Poland. The Diet, inspired by the wish of the conqueror, would have crowned the life-long intrigues of the Cardinal with success, by offering the throne to James Sobieski, son of the last King of Poland, but this Prince, together with his brother Constantine, was kidnapped by Saxon troops at Breslau and sent to close confinement in Germany.

The assembly at Varsovia therefore found themselves bound to find another rival to Augustus.

The Elector's fortunes now indeed seemed desperate; there was little more to be hoped from Saxony, where he had exhausted every resource, and nothing to be hoped from Poland, where his party had dwindled to a faction among factions, and where Karl was more absolute master than Augustus had been at the height of his prosperity.

The Swede had taken up his winter quarters at Heilsburg in Polish Russia, and from there surveyed tranquilly his conquests and his neighbors who regarded him with the respect of fear.

The war, which had now lasted four years, had been for him a series of unchecked victories; his arms had suffered no reverse and his reputation flamed in Europe; there had been no such invincible captain since the great Condé, and men could not remember a king who made a war of conquest with justice and mercy; no outrage, no massacre, no pillaging, or burning, no excesses, large or small, could be imputed to the soldiers of Karl.

He had attained, in a few years, a glory which is seldom the reward of a long and splendid career.

"Are you not now satisfied, sire?" asked Count Piper, with a real curiosity.

Karl smiled; he was in a good humor, for he had made an end of the Polish intrigues and was on the eve of giving a new King to Poland; he gave little confidence to his minister, but continued to employ him as one useful in those matters so distasteful to his own spirit, now entirely absorbed in war.

"You think to get me back to Stockholm, Count?" he asked.

Count Piper smiled in his turn; he knew too well the iron obstinacy with which he had to deal to attempt to persuade Karl to any design.

"Sire," he counter-questioned, "on whom now do you intend to make war?"

Karl lifted his cold blue eyes.

"There is always the Czar."

"But he has withdrawn himself, sire. I believe he cares no more about the war, despite the appeals of the Elector. He is absorbed in building his new city."

"I will topple over the foundations of his city," replied the stern young King. "Piper, have you ever known me alter my mind? I told you some while since that I had a mind to dethrone the Czar."

"The occupation of your Majesty's life is to be war?"

"What other occupation is there for a gentleman?" asked Karl.

Count Piper did not attempt to argue with him nor to express any opinion on this speech; Karl's career had been so startlingly and dazzlingly successful that it seemed useless to warn him or advise him; the cautious and prudent minister did not even venture now to point out the immense difficulties of an invasion of Russia, and the almost superhuman task it would be to subdue such a country and dethrone such a man as Peter.

Karl could point to achievements so splendid that it seemed an impertinence to hint at possible disaster, or to urge caution on one whose exploits had been heroic to the point of miracles.

"At least, sire, accept some of the fruits of your victories."

"You mean the crown of Poland?" said Karl thoughtfully.

He rose and went to the door of the tent, and stood looking out into the encampment that was fresh with spring breezes.

The minister gazed at him with the questioning curiosity and amazement that this young man had never failed to rouse in his heart.

Karl was now twenty-two years of age; a temperate, active, and simple life had developed his already splendid constitution into perfect hardihood; physically he was like the ancient Vikings whose exploits formed the subject of the sole literature he cared to read; tall, in fine proportion, with powerful shoulders and slender hips, and with the easy carriage of the soldier and the horseman, a creature of bone and muscle, nerve and sinew perfectly attuned.

His face had slightly changed, broadened and grown harder in the lines, but the expression was the same, the full lips, the curved nostrils, the blank eyes showed the same unmoved courage, the same indifference to things about him that had once made Count Piper liken him to a god—or an animal.

He still wore a dark blue uniform of the plainest cut, a black satin cravat, and was without peruke or

lace or ribbons or jewels; never in the slightest particular had he deviated from the austere conduct he had vowed to follow; his living was of the simplest, his couch a straw pallet or his own cloak; his food such as that eaten by the meanest foot soldier; since he left Stockholm he had never tasted wine nor spoken to a woman beyond the few words he had been forced to exchange with Aurora von Königsmarck. He passed his life in the camp, his companions were all soldiers, and little seemed to interest him beyond the things of war; the affairs of Sweden he left entirely in the hands of the regency; he cared nothing for the news from his capital, and never corresponded with his sole surviving relations, the Queen Dowager and his sisters.

Count Piper could not love him; perhaps because he had schooled himself to be above human weakness, no one loved him; certainly he never asked for anyone's affections and disclosed to no one his thoughts; his immense pride seemed to be satisfied by the fear he inspired even in his friends and respect accorded him even by his enemies.

"The crown of Poland, sire," said the minister, who could not resist looking upon the present situation from a statesman's point of view. "Your Majesty is aware how easily you might obtain this for yourself?"

"Yes," replied Karl dryly.

"It is what policy indicates."

"I never loved your policy, Count," said the King.

"Yet it is not to be disdained, even by a conqueror."

Karl gave his short, ugly laugh.

"I think I can dispense with it. As for this crown, I think it pleases me more to give it away than to wear it."

Piper had been expecting this; yet he resolved to endeavor to turn Karl's fantastic pride in another direction, and inspire him with the desire for a glory more useful to Sweden and mankind.

"Your Majesty might be truly the liberator of this distracted country and unite all factions in concord under your protection; the Romist faith whose arrogant clergy have enslaved these people might in this manner receive a shrewd blow, and your Majesty appear as defender of the Evangelical faith."

Karl did not reply to this proposition with that rude coldness with which he generally received suggestions not entirely in accordance with his own preconceived plans.

The truth was that the prospect held out by Count Piper tempted him.

The great Gustavus had established the Lutheran faith in Sweden and had banished forever from the North the corruption, the tyranny, and the superstition of the Roman priests; to do the same in a country as large and as important as Poland would be a feat that recommended itself to the ambition of Karl.

To take Poland not only from Augustus, but from the Pope, would have been a triumph such as he would have keenly enjoyed, for, while religion had had little influence on his life, he accorded his hereditary faith full respect and always enforced the observances of Lutheranism in his camp.

Count Piper watched him in silence, seeing that he was at least pondering the idea.

"Where will your Majesty find a King for Poland?" urged the minister. "Not even your entreaties will prevail upon Alexander Sobieski to accept the crown while his elder brothers are prisoners—and where is there any other pretender worthy of notice?"

Karl knew that he spoke the truth; with the romantic chivalry characteristic of the Polish nation, the youngest Sobieski had refused to accept the crown that the fortune of war prevented the eldest from enjoying, and there was, indeed, no one else especially indicated.

But to take this throne for himself was not sufficiently glorious for Karl; he wished to do the unusual,

the extraordinary, to make the world stare—not by what he accepted, but by what he refused.

Even the design of appearing as champion of the reformed faith lost its attraction for him, because a great prince lately dead had made his chief fame in this part; Karl did not wish to follow in the footsteps of anyone.

"No," he said sternly, suddenly letting the tent flap fall and turning to look at his minister. "I have more pleasure in giving away crowns than in taking them."

"You would, sire, sacrifice your interest——"

Karl interrupted.

"My interest!" he repeated as if offended, then with his ugly smile: "You should have been minister to some Italian prince, Piper, you are so fond of intrigues."

The Count bit his lip and was silent; he would have liked to have mentioned Sweden and *her* interests, but knew the cold repulse he would meet with.

The King crossed to his camp table and turned over some papers the secretary had left for his inspection, but with an absent look and a careless hand.

Count Piper was about to take his leave when his soldier servant ushered in the young Palatine of Posnanian and Alexander Sobieski.

This latter had waited on Karl to urge him to revenge the capture of his two brothers by Augustus; it entirely suited both the temper and the policy of the King of Sweden to promise him satisfaction, but he was not now so cordial towards the young prince whose obstinate refusal to accept his father's crown had rivaled and perhaps shadowed the generosity and strangeness of his own action.

But he greeted the two young Poles pleasantly, and offered each in turn the strong white hand from which he had drawn the long buffle glove worn with rein and sword pommel.

They were both brilliantly dressed, charming and graceful in manner and looks.

Karl's eyes, blue and cold as frozen water, cast a strange glance on the elegant figure of Stanislaus Leczinski.

"Count," he said, "here is the future King of Poland."

The minister was startled into an imprudence; staring at the amazed face of the young noble, he cried impetuously:

"The Palatine is too young, sire!"

"He is older than I am," said Karl dryly.

CHAPTER III

KARL, having given a new King to Poland, and satisfied his somber pride by being an "incognito" spectator of the election of the man whose elevation he owed entirely to Sweden, marched on Lemberg, the capital of Galicia, and took this town by assault, enriching his army with the treasures of Augustus that were stored here, and that the inhabitants surrendered to troops that neither burnt nor pillaged; he had hardly established his garrison in the conquered town when he was joined by Stanislaus Leczinski, cast from his throne after a reign of six weeks, and forced to fly for his life before the Elector of Saxony, who had appeared before Varsovia with a new army of 20,000 men, and had triumphantly entered the capital, scattering the Polish guard of Stanislaus and the Swedish garrison under Count Horn. His reverse was received with calm by the King of Sweden; it did not touch him personally, as he had not been present at the disaster, and he was not displeased at the opportunity to twice give the throne of Poland to the man whom he called friend.

"Let Augustus amuse himself," he told Stanislaus. "How long do you think he will hold Varsovia when I am before the gates?"

The words, spoken quietly and in no spirit of boasting, proved to be the truth.

Karl, with Stanislaus riding at his side, marched back on the capital, and the army of Augustus, consisting of lukewarm Poles, raw Saxon recruits, and vagabond Muscovites, melted before the approach of the terrible captain.

Count Schulenburg, in command of the Elector's army, did all that could be done with such an army, and by a series of masterly marches, fell back into Posnania where Karl overtook him near Runitz, and in a sharp action forced him to retreat, without, however, throwing him into disorder.

With the small remnant of his army he managed to escape, passing the Oder in the night, showing a generalship so superb as to force a compliment from the victor.

"We are the vanquished," said Karl. "M. de Schulenburg has out-generaled us."

He could afford to be generous, for Augustus had once more fled into Saxony, and was engaged in fortifying Dresden, a task that showed his fear of his enemy.

Stanislaus was crowned with splendid ceremonies in Varsovia by the Archbishop of Lemberg, the Cardinal Primate dying that very day after having refused to perform the ceremony on the grounds of displeasing the Pope who had threatened to excommunicate all those who elevated a Protestant King in place of a Catholic.

There was now only one person who dare even threaten Sweden, and that was the Czar. The bands of wandering Cossacks that he had sent to help Augustus had been easily subdued by the Swedish generals, and campaign after campaign opened and closed without his taking any part in the war beyond this feeble aid to Augustus.

But he was building St. Petersburg and creating an army and a navy, and when Augustus was forced to abandon Poland, Patkul, the envoy of the Czar in Dresden, was entrusted to persuade the Elector to meet Peter at Grodno, and once more contrive plans against the might of Sweden.

Peter appeared at Grodno with 70,000 trained troops, engineers, artillery, horse, and foot.

Augustus had nothing but a few Saxons under Gen-

eral Schulenbourg, and some bitterness mingled with his marvel at the change in their respective circumstances since last they had met at Birsén.

"Karl will not find it so easy to dethrone you as it was to dethrone me," he remarked to Peter.

"No," said the Czar.

He was called from the conference to put down a revolt in Astrakan, but his generals proceeded to put into practise the plans agreed upon by the two kings.

Schulenbourg advanced on Poland, and the Russian army, divided in small groups, marched into the Baltic Provinces.

There Karl met and defeated them, and after the other; he captured the baggage of Augustus with great store of gold and silver, and a large quantity of specie belonging to Prince Mentchikoff.

In two months the Russians were entirely defeated, and Schulenbourg again obliged to retreat; Karl drove the Muscovites before him to the frontiers of Russia, and Rehnsköld utterly defeated Schulenbourg at the battle of Fraustadt.

Karl then turned and marched on Saxony, passing through Silesia, without heeding the consternation of Germany and the protests of the Diet of Ratisbon.

Saxony was at his feet in a few weeks, and from the camp of Altranstadt he dictated his peace terms, forcing the Saxons to provide food and lodging and pay for his soldiers, but most strictly preventing these from the least insult, outrage, or disorder.

He passed his word to permit no excesses of any kind if the inhabitants submitted to his orders, and as his honor was well known to be unblemished a certain tranquillity took possession of the conquered country, which waited, with more resignation than despair, the terms of the invincible Swede.

Augustus, a fugitive in Poland, sent a certain Baron D'Imhof and M. Pfingsten to the camp at Altranstadt to demand terms of peace.

These two envoys arrived at night, but were immediately admitted to the presence of the King.

Each, despite the desperate importance of their mission, felt all emotion absorbed in a curiosity as to this man who had in a few years laid North Europe under his feet, and behaved in a manner so extraordinary for a conqueror.

Karl, who had no personal attendant, valet, or servant, rose from the rough camp bed where he took his few hours' repose, and came at once to meet the envoys of Augustus.

If he felt any satisfaction in this moment, when the man who had so carelessly and contemptuously affronted him was reduced to send to sue for mercy, it was not betrayed in his passive countenance.

He might indeed be used to triumphs; few men of his years had ever had a career of such uninterrupted success, and perhaps he was already indifferent to the haughty position of conqueror or at least too well used to it; he stood a moment holding up a little lamp and looking at the two Saxon gentlemen who stood, still in their traveling cloaks, bare-headed before him.

For the first second they did not know who stood before them; they were used to the magnificence and display of Augustus that he maintained even in his downfall, and Karl in his plain coat and short hair looked like an infantryman.

"The King," said Count Piper, with a curious pride in the man whom he disliked.

Karl cut short their rather confused compliments.

"You are from the Elector of Saxony?" he demanded sternly, and set the lantern on the table.

Baron D'Imhof was the spokesman.

"Yes, sire," he said.

"And what does the Elector want?" asked Karl.

The Saxon was a little taken aback; he had not been prepared to meet the King with so little ceremony, to converse with him with this dry abruptness.

With a bow he handed Karl the letter of Augustus, in which that monarch entreated for peace on any terms.

Karl glanced at the seal.

"Why this secrecy, gentlemen?" he asked, with his sudden, unpleasant smile.

The two plenipotentiaries were silent; they found themselves in that position in which it is difficult to do anything with dignity or even with grace.

"The Czar of Russia knows nothing of these negotiations?" demanded Karl.

"Sire," said Baron D'Imhof, "my master wished this to be between himself and you."

"He is ready then to abandon his ally who is not yet prepared to submit?" asked the King, his face, still as smooth as a mask of stone, unmarked by care or emotion, and radiant with the look of perfect health turned full towards the two Germans, and his strange eyes, chill and blue as his Northern seas, swept them with a glance of cold contempt. Again the Germans were silent.

"The Czar does not know of this letter?" demanded Karl.

"No, sire."

"If he had known it would never have been sent, I think," said Karl. "Your master did well to keep this matter secret, seeing he is at the mercy of the Muscovites."

"Sire, my master's actions are dictated by necessity," replied Baron D'Imhof. "He trusts a conqueror whom the world knows clement."

"Clement," returned the King. "I make no claim to be clement, sir. I am just."

His glance flickered over both of them, then to the letter in his hand.

"You have shown some courage in undertaking so unpleasant a task," he remarked.

"I was entrusted by King Augustus," replied the Baron, "to obtain from your Majesty a peace on as

Christian and reasonable terms as your magnanimity would be pleased to grant."

"Why does your master," asked Karl, "think I should be so merciful?"

The Saxon disliked this last word, but had to take it; he flushed slightly and bit his lip; this youthful conqueror was proving more difficult to deal with even than he had imagined. M. Pfingsten took the word.

"King Augustus——" he began.

"Call him the Elector," said Karl. "It is the safer title—we give him that out of courtesy since Saxony is as lost to him as Poland."

The envoy bowed, swallowed his humiliation, and began again.

"My master trusted something in the blood that unites him to your Majesty."

"Did he remember that we are cousins when he allied himself with Russia to seize my provinces?" demanded Karl.

With that, he turned his shoulders towards the two plenipotentiaries, and broke the seal of the unfortunate Elector's letter.

Count Piper eyed him as he read.

Half-leaning against the table with the lamp-light full over his figure, the young King, with his perfect physique, air of strength and hardihood, his noble face and soldier's bearing, made a picture grateful to the eye.

"Generous and merciful!" thought the minister. "They think him that because he punishes a soldier who steals a chicken, and gives away a crown he might have worn—but we shall see if he knows even the meaning of generosity and mercy."

Karl finished the letter, put it in his pocket, and glanced over his shoulder at the two waiting Saxons.

"Gentlemen," he said, "you shall have your answer immediately."

He took up the lamp and went into a little cabinet

that opened off the chamber, closing the door behind him.

The Saxons could not but stare at seeing the simplicity of the man who had conquered Northern Europe.

The plain room without hangings or carpet, the entire lack of servants or guard, the King's own appearance and the way in which he waited on himself, caused them astonishment, and would, under other circumstances, have roused their contempt and disgust.

Count Piper noted their expressions and the glance they exchanged.

"Ah, gentlemen," he said, "you do not know with whom you have to deal!"

"In what way, sir?" asked Baron D'Imhof, who felt more at ease in the presence of the minister than in that of the King.

"Your errand is desperate," replied the Count, with some feeling for fellow diplomats in a hopeless position, "and the success of it, gentlemen, does not depend on any arts of your own."

"No," said M. Pfingsten, "but entirely on the disposition of the King of Sweden."

"Exactly," said Count Piper. "Your only hope is that you may excite compassion in the heart of a man who has never known a gentle emotion, and turn from his course the most obstinate creature who ever breathed."

He smiled cynically, and made a movement with his hands as if he cast away the responsibility of his master's actions.

"You give us good hopes," said Baron D'Imhof, with some bitterness.

Count Piper did not directly reply to this.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I will give you this advice—whatever the King says accept it; take up your hats and begone with what good grace you can, for he will never alter his mind."

As he spoke Karl entered from the cabinet, carry-

ing a paper on which the close writing still gleamed with the wet ink.

He gave this to Count Piper and bade him read it to the Saxons.

"I will give your master peace on these terms," he said, "and you must not hope that I shall alter any of them."

The minister bent nearer the two tall candles on the table that gave the sole light in the rooms and read, in an even official voice, the terms of the conqueror.

The King had written his fiat with his own hand without troubling to call his secretary, and the caligraphy was quick and flowing as that of one whose thoughts move faster than his pen; as Piper knew Karl was only now putting on paper the terms that he had in his mind from the first to impose on Augustus.

The conditions were four in number.

"Firstly.—The Elector must renounce forever the throne of Poland, recognize Stanislaus Leczinski as King, and, even in the event of this prince's death, make no attempt to regain the throne.

"Secondly.—He must renounce all the alliances he has made against Sweden—particularly those with Muscovy.

"Thirdly.—The Princes Sobieski and other prisoners of war are to be sent with honor to my Camp.

"Fourthly.—He is not to seek to punish any one of his following who have joined me, and he is to deliver to me all these deserters whom he has with him, and especially John Patkul."

As Count Piper finished the two Saxons cried out in startled tones against the hardness of these terms.

Karl smiled.

"Did you expect," he asked dryly, "other terms? Think, gentlemen, what Augustus would have exacted had he been at the gates of Stockholm as I am at those of Dresden."

"Sire," returned M. D'Imhof, in great agitation, "my master is honorable and merciful—he would never have propounded such a condition as that last."

"You question these terms?" demanded the terrible young conqueror, with a cold and disdainful look.

"I say, sire," replied the Saxon firmly, "that my master can never in honor surrender General Patkul."

The sound of the name seemed to anger Karl; his blue eyes darkened and flashed.

"I do not argue," he said. "These are my terms."

"But General Patkul," urged M. Pfingsten anxiously, "is an envoy of the Czar, and as such sacred——"

"Since when," interrupted Karl, with a biting contempt, "has the Muscovite claimed the privileges of civilized rulers? Patkul is my subject, a deserter and a traitor."

"The conditions are very bitter," said Baron D'Imhof. "Let your Majesty reflect if they are such as a Christian Prince can accept."

"Well," replied Karl, with his cold air of stubborn hardihood, "no doubt I can find another Elector for Saxony as I found another King for Poland."

"We may, sire, discuss these terms with Count Piper?" asked M. Pfingsten, clutching at straws.

"As much as you wish," said Karl, with a stern smile. "Count Piper knows my mind and if I am likely to change it."

"I have already warned these gentlemen," remarked the minister.

Karl now turned and with a rude coldness was leaving the chamber.

Count Piper gave the piece of paper that had so tremendous a meaning to the confused and humiliated deputies of Augustus.

M. Pfingsten took courage to speak.

"Our master can never surrender the crown of Poland or General Patkul."

Karl paused on the threshold of the inner room.

"Why was John Patkul arrested in Dresden the other day, as soon as his protector, the Muscovite, had left for Astrakan?"

"It was of some mistake, sire——"

"Ah," interrupted Karl, with an ugly laugh, "it was no mistake. Your master saw that he had the Livonian in his house before he asked for peace—and why? Because he knew that I should ask for Patkul and that he would surrender."

With these words, spoken with a cold indifference more than any passionate tone of insult, Karl, disdain- ing to hold further argument with the envoys of his fallen enemy or to take any ceremonious leave of them, bowed briefly to the Saxons and left the chamber.

Baron D'Imhof could hardly contain himself.

"So this is greatness!" he exclaimed ironically. He put up the paper in his bosom. "We will wait on you to-morrow, Count, though I doubt if it will be of any use."

"You have heard my master's will," replied Count Piper, "and he never changes his resolutions."

In the small, bare inner chamber the man, who had upset kingdoms and altered the face of North Europe for no other reason than pride and the desire for military glory, laid himself again on his straw mattress and hard pillow.

Augustus was conquered as effectually as had been Frederic; it had taken longer, years instead of weeks, but it had been done.

And Patkul, the arch conspirator, would finally be punished.

There remained only Peter. . . .

Karl turned on his rude pillow and fell asleep, dream- ing of the downfall of the Czar, his last and greatest enemy.

CHAPTER IV

WHEN M. Pfingsten returned to Poland with the articles of peace that no amount of interviews with Count Piper had served to alter, he found his master once again in Varsovia, in the midst of "Te Deums" and bell-rings for the first victory over the Swedes that had been attained during the course of this long war.

The envoy from Saxony, almost confounded by this change of fortune, learned that the Muscovites under Prince Mentchikoff had defeated the Swedes under General Mardenfeldt who found himself in the Palatinate of Posnania with 10,000 men against the combined Saxon and Russian forces amounting to nearly 40,000.

But what surprised M. Pfingsten was the fact that the Elector had been in this battle and had irritated Karl in this manner at the very moment when he was imploring that monarch's mercy.

He hastened through the ruined capital now being pillaged by the Muscovites to the ancient palace where Augustus was again in residence.

The Elector immediately gave him audience; it was early in the morning and he sat over a fire, for the autumn air was keen, and was drinking coffee dashed with cognac, out of a pale porcelain cup.

Some attempt at refinement and splendor still surrounded the man who had been one of the most brilliant princes in Europe; he was wrapped in a blue and gold brocade dressing-gown, wore a French peruke, diamonds in his lace cravat, and long ruffles of Mechlin at his wrists.

Elegant and beautiful articles were scattered about

the room, and a cardinal of violet silk and a pair of heelless white silk slippers bespoke the presence of a woman.

But the fair face of the Elector was haggard and pale; he looked at M. Pfingsten with eyes full of a cruel distress.

"Sire," this gentleman hastened to say, "I rejoice to find you in circumstances which can enable you to deal on terms of equality with the King of Sweden."

"Do not mock me, Pfingsten," replied the Elector, in a tone of agitation. "You find me in the most miserable position, and whatever the terms you have brought back I must sign them."

"Nay, God forbid!" exclaimed the envoy.

Augustus set down his coffee cup with a shaking hand.

"Are they then so hard?"

"Sire, they are impossible."

Augustus gave a miserable smile.

"You do not understand my position," he said bitterly.

"This victory is futile and barren and will only further serve to inflame the Swede."

"Then, why did not your Majesty wait my return before giving battle?"

The Elector replied with the useless impatience of a weak nature.

"It was the cursed Muscovite! What was I to do? Mentchikoff would give battle, no excuse would put him off. I knew that it would mean a defeat for Sweden, they were so outnumbered. I had only a handful of Saxons, and had those savages guessed that I was in treaty with the Swede they had murdered me—cursed be the day when I was allied with such dangerous rascals!"

M. Pfingsten could say nothing; he saw that this new victory had indeed put his master in a delicate and difficult position; he was forced either to affront his dangerous allies in whose power he was or to offend the conqueror on whose mercy he had thrown himself; his was the common fate of the weak, who, lacking

all qualities of resolution and daring, find that concession and subterfuge lead them into a position where no way is open to them with both safety and honor.

"I sent privately to General Mardenfeldt," continued the Elector, pouring out another cup of the strong coffee, "warned him of his danger and my secret negotiation, and advised him to retire—but the hard-headed fool took it for a trap and would fight."

"At least the victory was complete?"

"Yes. I was surprised myself. The Muscovites can fight as well as marauder, it seems. Mentchikoff is sending the Czar a bombastic account of it, but it is all futile," he added peevishly.

M. Pfingsten, a man of more nerve than his master, did not entirely agree with this dispirited view.

He thought that at least Augustus could now refuse the shameful terms imposed by Karl XII.

Taking the letter from his breast-pocket he put it among the delicate coffee service on the tulip-wood table by the Elector's elbow.

Augustus picked it up with nervous fingers, glanced at it, and fetched a groan, a look of real anguish distorting his handsome face.

Each of the four conditions were bitterly hard, the last struck at his honor as a gentleman; Patkul had been in his service, had trusted and did trust him, and was, moreover, sacred as the envoy of the Czar.

Augustus had shrunk from abandoning his ally; he felt it would be impossible to betray him by delivering to his enemy a man who was general and ambassador of Russia.

He put the letter down and sat staring into the fire.

"There was no possibility of moving the King?" he asked, in a broken voice.

"Not the faintest; he prides himself on his obstinacy and sternness. I think he is quite implacable," replied M. Pfingsten, with dreary memories of the hardness of the young captain.

"Then there is nothing for me to do but accept these terms," said Augustus.

This complete and instantaneous submission startled M. Pfingsten; he had not believed that Augustus would have been so subdued by his miseries and disasters as to have no spirit left with which to meet this extremity.

"There is one thing your Majesty can do—you can advance into Saxony with these Muscovite troops and attack the King of Sweden."

Augustus gave the speaker a wild look.

"Take advantage, sire," urged M. Pfingsten, "of this moment of good fortune."

Augustus hesitated; the terms offered by Karl were so hateful that he was glad to catch at anything that seemed to promise relief from the necessity of accepting them.

At the same time his reverses had been so continuous and terrible, he had gradually lost everything and exhausted every resource, he was so convinced of the invincible genius of Karl, so worn out in this long combat with one in every respect his superior, that his spirit, by no means firm or martial, though he was, in his way, brave and ambitious, was completely broken, and his terrified imagination saw no escape from his present difficulties save by throwing himself utterly on the mercy of the man in whose hands his fate lay.

"If I could see Karl face to face," he began in a distracted tone, "I could surely induce him to soften these terms."

"Let your Majesty put that out of your head," replied M. Pfingsten firmly. "The King of Sweden is as hard as one of his northern rocks—his plainness and his show of courtesy to the vanquished but mask a spirit without sentiment, a heart without feeling. Count Piper told me that his preference for Stanislaus Leczinski is but based on his temperate life—he has given that man a throne merely because he is his own

body servant and sleeps on a straw mattress! He admires nothing but Spartan virtues and respects nothing but military glory."

"Well, then," cried Augustus, a prey to the most bitter distress and agitation, "there is nothing for me to do but to sign this cursed paper!"

"Your Majesty might strike another blow."

"You do not understand my position—the Muscovites have defeated Mardenfeldt, they cannot defeat Karl—and if they discover that I am in negotiation with him, they will abandon, if not murder me. You do not know, Pfingsten, the ferocity of this Mentchikoff or his devotion to his master. As for my resources," he added, with a sigh as of one who had too well calculated, often enough, his hopes and fears, "you know what they amount to—Saxony is barren both of men and money—Poland lost."

"Some help might be hoped for from the Empire, sire."

"Not while Austria wars with France."

"And surely, sire, the Electorate is not yet exhausted," protested Pfingsten.

"Ravaged by the Muscovites, occupied by the Swedes, what can be hoped for from my wretched country?" exclaimed Augustus bitterly; he rose, and thinking of the only friend and confidante he now possessed, he went to an inner door concealed under a hanging of stamped and gilt leather and called a woman's name.

Aurora von Königsmarck immediately entered the apartment.

She had remained faithful to this King who was without a throne, men, money, or friends, perhaps out of compassion, perhaps because she had no choice of a more glorious destiny; certainly she had accompanied him in all his flights and battles and distresses as closely as had Katherina the Czar, though with a colder sympathy and a more disdainful endurance of evil fortune. She was the only person besides the two envoys who

knew of the embassy to Karl; she had sent even her women away, and was alone in the apartment of the King.

"Well?" she demanded dryly, seeing by the Elector's face that it was further ill news.

Her bold glance flickered to M. Pfingsten.

"You have come on a disagreeable errand, sir," she remarked, "but these are disagreeable times."

She came, with her quick, graceful walk, to the fireplace, and stood before the flames looking at the downcast faces of the two men.

Since she had, in the height of her pride, lowered herself before Karl XII, she had lost something of her beauty and all of her magnificence.

Like everything belonging to Augustus, she was tarnished by continual ill-fortune; nor did she care for the neatness and order possible even in poverty; she would be either splendid or careless, and disdained those shifts that labor to cover deficiency with artifice.

She who had blazed in Dresden as the most gorgeous lady of the court, now showed in a negligent undress of soiled sprigged silk over a petticoat of yellow taffetas, with her rich hair fastened in a loose knot without either art or neatness; her beauty was not of that radiant youthfulness that can overcome these disadvantages, and she looked as damaged in her fortunes, as eclipsed in her charms, as was proper to the favorite of a fallen prince.

In silence Augustus handed her the letter from Karl.

He had a great faith in her intelligence, and even now cherished a hope that her wit would point out some way of escape from his dilemma that had not occurred to either Pfingsten or himself.

Aurora read the letter and her nostrils dilated.

Not Augustus himself knew a bitterer humiliation than she experienced as she read the conqueror's terms.

She hated Karl with all the hatred of which her passionate nature was capable.

As he had so easily resisted her fascinations, so rudely refused her advances, so completely scorned her, she did not regard him as a man, but as some soulless creature, a werlion or wertiger sent on earth to plague mankind.

She fumbled at her laces with a quivering hand and darted a keen glance at the gloomy countenance of the Elector.

"Are you going to take these terms?" she demanded impetuously.

"Do you see anything else for me to do?" asked the disheartened Prince.

"Nothing a man like you *could* do," she replied sharply.

"Madame," said M. Pfingsten, "there is the Muscovite army."

"But where is the man to lead it?" asked Aurora, with a cruel glance at Augustus.

M. Pfingsten was encouraged by her presence, which breathed energy and vitality.

"Let your Majesty," he urged, "tear up that paper—put yourself at the head of the army now in Varsovia and march on Saxony—there is nothing more to lose and everything to be gained."

"Sir," said the Countess bitterly, "you discuss expedients only possible with another prince—and with another prince we should not have been brought to this pass."

Augustus flushed but could find no answer in his own defense.

"What is it that you propose to do?" she added sharply.

"To sign that paper and go to Saxony to entreat Sweden to soften these terms," replied the unfortunate Elector; he was indeed so absorbed in the contemplation of his own misery as to hardly wince under Aurora's scorn.

She tapped her foot in an angry silence; she saw this was the fatal way of weakness, which would have

neither the dignity of defiance nor the advantage of concession, since she knew well enough that Karl would be merely irritated by any attempt to dispute his terms.

But she also knew the man with whom she had to deal, and that it was hopeless to expect even the semblance of heroism from a Prince like Augustus, overwhelmed by six years of a disastrous war that had stripped him of everything, even faith in himself.

"Well, you must sign," she said.

There was a little silence, then the Countess added in a hard tone:

"Mdle. D'Einsiedel came here last night—hurrying from Dresden to beg for General Patkul's release."

"My God!" broke from Augustus, as he realized the baseness of the action he contemplated.

"And she has been to Prince Mentchikoff, who is going to ask for the Livonian's release in the name of the Czar."

Augustus stood in a wretched silence.

"I never understood why Patkul was arrested," continued Aurora, in a curious tone.

An uneasy flush stained the Elector's distressed face; he did not look up.

"Was it because you foresaw this emergency?" added the Countess.

M. Pfingsten was startled to hear her express the same question as had Karl.

He knew that General Patkul had been arrested, on some flimsy pretext of having exceeded his duties, immediately after the Czar's departure for Astrakan, and that he had been kept in easy and honorable captivity at Sonnenstein, but not even when Karl had flung his sneer had he thought for a moment that there was any connection between the arrest of the Livonian and the position of Augustus before the conqueror.

Now, as he heard the sharp words of the Countess and looked at the stricken figure of Augustus, it occurred to him as at least strange that the very man, on

the surrender of whom depended the peace, should be so completely in the Elector's power—so that no warnings by his friends, no protection from the Czar, his master, could save him from being delivered to Sweden.

"If you had not had Patkul at Sonnenstein," said Aurora, "you could not have surrendered him to Karl, and there would have been no pacifying this victor. You are fortunate."

Goaded, Augustus turned on her with a flash of impotent anger.

"You talk so much of General Patkul, Madame—you do not seem to attach any importance to the fact that I shall have to surrender Poland!"

It was M. Pfungsten who replied—with great earnestness.

"Sire, your Majesty, by the fortunes of war, may easily regain the crown of Poland, but you can never regain what you lose if you surrender General Patkul."

"You are a poor diplomat," returned the Elector angrily. "Are there not ways of saving General Patkul? I can appeal to the King of Sweden personally."

His hedging weakness angered Aurora; it was true that she had suggested the surrender of Patkul and even broached the subject to Karl, but that had been while there had been something to gain by concession; now that her side was thoroughly beaten her blood was up, and, if she had been Augustus, she would have cast Sweden's terms in his face. Also she was naturally generous, and once she realized what the delivery of Patkul to Karl meant she could not put her hand to it; she saw that Augustus would yield, had always meant to yield, and she despised him for it, as women will despise men for weaknesses and meannesses of which they are capable themselves.

"Very well," she said, "sign those terms."

She came quickly up to him, putting her lovely hand on his brocaded sleeve.

"Patkul must escape," she added, gazing into the trembling face of Augustus. "Send an order to the

Governor of Sonnenstein to let him, secretly, go at once."

Augustus was relieved by this suggestion that seemed to suit both his convenience and his honor, yet he hesitated; to do this would be to play a trick on the man on whose mercy his very existence would depend; if Karl, who would be already sufficiently irritated by the victory of Kalisz, knew of this fresh attempt to fool him, he would undoubtedly refuse any possible concession in the harshness of his demands.

But Aurora had pushed pen and paper under the reluctant hand of Augustus.

"He trusted you," she said, "and to give him to Karl is to give him to a cruel death."

"Sweden might be merciful," muttered Augustus.

Aurora ignored this feeble futility and resorted to another argument, more powerful to influence the distracted Elector than the last.

"Sire, Prince Mentchikoff will demand Patkul, Mdle. D'Einsiedel will rouse Russia—better, at least, compromise."

Augustus seized the pen and hastily wrote an order for the secret and immediate release of Patkul; Aurora von Königsmarck took it from him and left the room.

Everything was lost, but the brilliant and wayward woman did not think of that; she went to her bed-chamber, threw on a mantle, and hastened to a little closet in her suite of apartments, now all dismantled and in confusion.

A pale girl stood with locked hands at the window, staring out at the chill September morning.

The Countess thrust into her hands the order for General Patkul's release.

"That goes to-day, dear, by our fleetest courier." In the evening Augustus signed the terms dictated by Karl XII.

BOOK VI

THE BETRAYAL

"Il y a un vulgaire parmi les princes, comme parmi les autres hommes."—VOLTAIRE.

CHAPTER I

PRINCE MENTCHIKOFF returned at once to Russia to put before the Czar the new turn of events in Poland.

Peter was still at Marli, superintending the building of his new capital which was rising out of the filled dykes and drained marshes of the desolate flats of the banks of the Neva.

Mentchikoff was almost beside himself with fury at the news he brought, but his rage was as nothing beside that of the Emperor.

Peter glared at his friend with a wrath he could hardly sustain; but contrary to his use, he made a terrible effort to control himself that he might hear the tale to the full.

He had been, at first, vexed at seeing Mentchikoff, thinking that he should not have left the newly regained Varsovia, but now he admitted that the Prince had done right to bring news so tremendous himself.

He sat on a gilt leather arm-chair, in the little front room of his cottage, dressed in a rough green frieze riding suit, his boots muddy and a riding switch in his hand; he had just returned from a visit of inspection of St. Petersburg, where streets, shops, palaces, and

churches were already covering the outlines of the city.

Mentchikoff stood before him in the rich costume of a Russian general, European in cut, but Eastern in color and embroidery, a diamond in his sword hilt, a star on his breast, lace at his throat and wrists.

His long brown and lean face, with the sharp bright black eyes and thick lips, was pale with the intense passion of a fierce and uncivilized nature.

"This is what he did, Peter Alexievitch! I put him back in Varsovia; he did not want to give battle at Kalisz—one knows why now! And one morning he was gone—gone! With his woman and his valets—gone! To Altranstadt—to the camp of the Swede!"

"You were properly fooled," muttered the Czar, in a stifling voice.

Mentchikoff made not the least attempt to deny this.

"There was one Pfingsten, one of his Germans, whom he sent to Karl—and who brought his terms writ on a bit of paper, and he, this cursed Augustus, signed and fled, to put himself at Karl's mercy."

The Emperor's eyes showed red, a faint dew besprinkled his forehead, he bent his whip across his knee till it cracked, then flung it away and buried his face in his hands, running his fingers into his dusky curls.

"Mdle. D'Einseidel came to me, the very day before—for months she had been trying to find me—to tell me about Patkul. The whole thing was kept secret, but it seems that he was arrested when you were called to Astrakan. Of course Augustus knew the Swede would ask for him."

"My ambassador—my general!" groaned Peter.

"When the Elector fled, this lady went back to vantage of his hurried departure to order at once the release of Patkul, but there was much delay, he having been moved from Sonnenstein to Königstein; the messenger reached the governor of this place in time—the Countess von Königsmarck was very active in

this intrigue—but he tried to get Patkul to pay ransom, knowing of his wealth, and while this argument was in progress the Swedish officers arrived, and Patkul is now in Altranstadt, fastened in a cellar with a great iron chain round his waist.”

Peter raised his face which was quite distorted, the eyes infected with blood, the lips livid.

“May the Devil overtake Augustus and torture him in Hell forever!” he stammered. “May he be steeped to the lips in sorrow and bitterness, the vile, false coward.”

He ceased with a sob of sheer fury; he had always despised Augustus, but never believed him capable of this; disloyalty and cowardice were the two unforgivable crimes in the eyes of the Muscovite; his primitive nature did not recognize the usual excuses offered by diplomacy for the actions forced by necessity on states and princes; nothing could palliate the Elector’s conduct in his eyes; he considered that he had been treated with black treachery and base ingratitude, and that Augustus had behaved with the utmost villainy. He certainly was incapable of such conduct himself; he would have died cheerfully sooner than submit to an enemy, and though he might punish even his own family with savage cruelty if he suspected them of treachery, he would never have deserted a friend or have betrayed an ally.

Through all the Elector’s misfortunes Peter had been staunch to him, and, to the best of his ability, held out a helping hand; and when he remembered that last Conference at Grodno, the amiable flattery of the Saxon, the mutual promises, the sworn treaties, the vows of friendship and mutual help against the Swede, and thought how the Elector had taken advantage of his hurried departure to order at once the arrest of the man who was a valuable asset in dealing with the enemy, he was shaken by an excess of fury.

“Danilovitch!” he cried, “I shall never forgive you

that you did not discover this traitor and bring him in chains to me!"

"I shall never forgive myself, Peter Alexievitch," replied the Prince simply. "But who would have thought of such vileness? He has that smooth Western way of lies and smiles."

"The woman Königsmarck is in this."

"I do not think so. I know that she did her best to save Patkul; she has more courage than he, and I think, more honor. She is a friend, too, of Mdlle. Einsiedel—that child will die of this, Peter Alexievitch."

"What will they do with Patkul?" asked Peter fiercely.

"He is to be tried by a council of war. Karl treats him as a rebellious subject. He will suffer a cruel death."

In Karl's place Peter would have behaved with the same severity; he had never shown mercy to those whom he judged rebels, and therefore he did not feel the fury of hate towards Karl that he felt towards Augustus, but he was conscious of a certain wonder that this young king whom he had regarded with secret admiration as being much greater than himself, could indulge in the same bloodthirsty vengeance.

"Is this Sweden's famous clemency?" he asked bitterly. "Is he then so magnificent?"

He was silent, communing with his own soul; he thought he would have been more chivalrous than Karl, and not taken advantage of the weakness of Augustus to demand the surrender of a man in the employ of another monarch.

From that moment the cold knightly figure of the Scandinavian, vested with all the virtues to which he himself might never hope to aspire, was smirched in the eyes of Peter.

"The Muscovite prisoners were slain after Fraustadt—by whose orders?" he said. "And now this. This man is no better than I," he added, with a strange simplicity, "and I shall defeat him."

Then his thoughts turned to Augustus, and he flashed from brooding into wrath.

"How was the Elector received at Altranstadt?" he demanded.

"The Swede met him privately, they say, and treated him with a cold civility. Their talk was of trifles, mainly of the boots Karl wore, which he had never been without, he said, for ten years, save to sleep, and then Stanislaus Leczinski came, and Augustus had to salute him as King of Poland."

"Is it possible there lives a prince so spiritless!" exclaimed Peter.

"He must have suffered," said Mentchikoff with satisfaction. "After Kalisz Sweden's terms became harder. Augustus had to send the archives and State jewels to Stanislaus, cause his name as King of Poland to be effaced from all documents and monuments, and write a letter of congratulation to Stanislaus."

"And that is the mercy he obtained by throwing himself on the compassion of Karl!" cried the Russian, "and I was allied with such a prince! What does he mean to do now?"

"Karl is supposed to retire from Saxony and leave him in peace," said Mentchikoff dryly. "As for the Palatine of Posnanian, he has a poor gift in the throne of Poland—the factious nobles, such as the Sapieha, have laid waste what the Swedes and your Muscovites have spared. The country is a smoking ruin."

"And that is what the King of Sweden has achieved by his conquest," said Peter grimly. "Why does he so favor Stanislaus Leczinski?"

"No one knows—perhaps because he knows how to flatter him."

Peter gave his favorite an ugly look.

"Do you think that is the sole reason for the friendship of kings?" he demanded.

Mentchikoff saw his danger and fell on one knee, kissing passionately his master's rough hand; he knew that there is nothing an absolute prince dislikes more than the insinuation that he is ruled through his vanity and

adroitly influenced by flattery, even though he is seldom led by any other means or persuasion.

Peter was mollified by this act of homage.

"If you flattered me, Danilovitch, I should love you no longer," he said.

"If I had been a flatterer," replied Mentchikoff, "I should not have brought you this ill news, Peter Alexievitch."

The Czar rose, raising his favorite also to his feet. He did not feel any ill-will towards the Prince for his failure to detect the secret negotiations of the Elector; all the force of his ardent soul was absorbed in fury against his faithless ally.

"Patkul must be saved," he said. "Am I to submit to this treatment? I will appeal to England, to Holland, to the Empire!"

Mentchikoff did not voice his thoughts, which were that the name of Karl now sounded so terribly in Europe that it was doubtful if any nation would dare to interfere with him, besides the fact that the countries mentioned by Peter were engaged in a costly war with France.

He frowned at the floor and was silent; he could see no way by which Peter could come by satisfaction and vengeance save through his own genius and might.

"Patkul shall not die," said Peter. "Karl would not dare."

"There are the Swedish prisoners who might be executed in reprisal," remarked Mentchikoff.

This suggestion suited Peter's breed and training, and, perhaps, his disposition, but that prudence and foresight that distinguished him from his predecessors caused him to reject a proposal that was useless and dangerous.

"There are more Muscovites in Sweden than Swedes in Muscovy," he said grimly. "I will take another vengeance. I will march on Poland."

He paused and tore at his neckcloth as if to loosen it and give himself air.

"Of all those who joined against Karl, there is only

Russia left," he added, with a terrible look. "But Russia will defeat him—listen, Danilovitch, I will not stop until I have crushed him, beaten him, reduced him, as he has crushed, beaten, and reduced Augustus! And if he slays Patkul——"

He paused and added in a low voice: "I loved Patkul."

He took a turn about the room in a great and increasing agitation.

"Seven years have I fought him—with no weapons but those that I could forge myself well; he had everything to his hand, and he conquered. But I am ready now. Are not things different, Danilovitch? I have built a city and a fort, a navy; I have trained an army—can I not defeat Karl of Sweden?"

"I never doubted," replied Mentchikoff, a look of fiery enthusiasm in his little dark eyes, "that your Majesty would bring down this insolent braggart."

"To break him, Danilovitch!" cried the Czar. "To smash his invincible armies, to send his veterans flying before me, to make him fly—to drive him to ruin, to exile, to make the glory of his victories disappear like smoke before the sun! That would be an achievement, Danilovitch!"

He paused, exhausted by his own passion, and caught hold of the back of the chair in which he had been sitting.

"I did not enter into this war for lust of conquest," he said, as if justifying himself, yet with an almost wistful dignity. "Not for hate, as Denmark did—not for folly, as Saxony did. I wanted my Baltic ports—the trade, the commerce, the prosperity. No one understands that."

"These things must be fought for, Peter Alexievitch," replied Mentchikoff.

"To that end have I built a navy and trained an army," said Peter sternly. "I perceive that I shall get nothing of what I want as long as Karl of Sweden is master of the North."

He sat down again with something of a groan; rage at the defection of Augustus so consumed him that he could hardly command his thoughts.

"Sweden does not know," remarked Mentchikoff, "what he has roused in Russia. He thinks the Muscovites may be scattered by the whip and are not worthy of powder and shot—he insults Augustus with impunity because he does not think that we are to be feared."

Peter turned his inflamed eyes towards the dark, pearl-crowned ikon that hung above the stove.

"God, help me to do this one thing," he muttered. "To smite Sweden."

His face assumed an expression of dark and lowering anger.

"If Patkul is slain," he added. "Now would Sweden dare?"

Then, with a sudden and entirely unconscious pathos, "Europe will not listen to me—I am only the Czar of Muscovy. They do not take me as a power to be reckoned with, Danilovitch."

"They do not know you, Peter Alexievitch," replied Mentchikoff.

Peter pursued his own train of thought.

"He breaks all international law—if Patkul had been the envoy of any other country but Russia the world would have cried out against this treatment."

Despite his passionate nature and his autocratic position he saw shrewdly enough just how Europe held him.

"I will make my protest, but who will take any notice of it?" he continued.

"Peter Alexievitch, you must make your own protest," said Mentchikoff, in an energetic tone. "Cannot you defeat Sweden?" added this fiery Russian.

"It has been done," responded the Czar, with a sudden smile. "You beat them at Kalisz!"

He spoke warmly and without a trace of envy of his subject's success in a war where he had every time

failed himself, thereby, had he known it, showing himself greater than Karl, who had not been able to restrain his jealousy on hearing of Mardenfeldt's victory at Fraustadt.

With equal generosity and selflessness Mentchikoff replied:

"I was in a little way the forerunner of you, Peter Alexievitch—when you strike, Sweden will quiver to the shock!"

The Emperor fixed on him soft and lustrous eyes, tired and earnest.

"I must call a council," he said, "but I know what to do—I will descend on Poland with my new army. Karl is likely to remain at Altranstadt?"

"There is no talk of his leaving. The English are sending an envoy to him—at least a rumor says so."

"They are afraid he will fall on the Empire," said Peter instantly.

"He will not," replied Mentchikoff simply. "His design is solely against Russia."

"He troubles himself not at all about the West?"

"Not at all, I think. He would be Alexander—Saxony is but his Thrace—Russia must be his Persia, and he thinks all his conquests little things beside that battle that must be his Gaugamela!"

"He would dethrone me, and I would break him utterly," remarked Peter. "It only is to be seen which is the stronger man."

He pressed Mentchikoff's hand and left the room abruptly, seeking that comfort which never failed to soothe him in his most gloomy and bitter moods, Katheria, now his wife.

He found her in the garden amid the lilac thickets that were just beginning to be covered with their pale flowers.

The Livonian peasant girl was now rather stout, heavy and indolent in habit, slow in her movements, generally silent, with a good-natured smile on her full lips.

Her extraordinary elevation had in no way altered her disposition; she was as unassuming as she had been when she was the servant of Mentchikoff; she did not mingle in the least in politics of which she understood nothing, but she was intelligent enough to at least feign an appreciation of what Peter was trying to do for Russia, and her quiet sweetness, her placid cheerfulness never grew stale to Peter; he looked upon her almost as his savior from the devils of melancholy and horror that tore at his soul.

He was not nice in his tastes. Her lack of refinement did not vex him; her over-blown, untidy beauty still satisfied him, neither her manners nor her past troubled him; with a certain grandeur he disdained everything but the fact that she was the one woman he had found wholly pleasing; she went everywhere with him and knew all his secrets; so far she had been faithful to him, perhaps because in her heart she was entirely afraid of him, and, for all her outward calm, very wary.

The Czar flung himself on the seat she reclined on, and put his arm round her shoulders, turning her fair countenance, framed in the long, Russian veil, towards him.

"Saxony has delivered my Patkul to Sweden!" he said.

"Alas, poor gentleman!" cried Katherina, in genuine distress.

Peter kissed her fiercely.

"What do you think I shall do, my rose?" he asked.

"Why, rescue him, Peter Alexievitch."

"That, if I can—if I am too late—" the veins stood out on his forehead and a light foam gathered on his lips. "Do you not think I shall avenge him?" he asked pitifully.

Katherina answered as if he had been a child.

"Why, of course," she said.

CHAPTER II

EUROPE, absorbed in the war of the Spanish Succession, paid no heed to the Czar's bitter protests against Saxony and Sweden, and Patkul was sent to Kazimicry.

Peter, with an army of 60,000 trained men, officered by Germans, obtained secretly from the Emperor of Austria, who was alarmed by the near approach of the terrible Swede, marched into Poland.

General Lewenhaupt was not able to guard the entries into this country which was neither fortified nor united, and the Czar took Lublin which had been left without a Swedish garrison, and there convoked a Diet on the model of that of Varsovia, thereby further distracting an already thrice distracted country.

Augustus was now as hateful as Stanislaus in the eyes of Peter, and his project was to give all that the Elector had renounced by the peace of Altranstadt to a third king; he had in his mind Racoczy, Prince of Transylvania.

Russian gold and Russian promises soon gained a powerful faction in Poland; Peter exerted himself to please.

His portrait, enriched with diamonds, was presented to the officers who had fought at Kalisz, and gold and silver medals to the soldiers; it was the Czar's great pride to mention that these records of his first victory had been struck in his new capital.

The Diet at Lublin, however, distracted by faction and intrigue, fearful of Sweden and suspicious of the Czar, made little progress towards any settlement of the affairs of Poland; it would recognize neither

Augustus nor Stanislaus, but was by no means agreed as to the man to put in the place of these monarchs. Peter, with a slowness that led his enemy into despising him, remained at Lublin watching these intrigues and training his army, his sole encounters with the enemy being skirmishes between wandering parties of Muscovites and detachments of Lewenhaupt's Swedes in Livonia and Lithuania; a kind of warfare which ruined the wretched country without giving any advantage to either side. Meanwhile the Sapieha and Oginski, again commenced pillaging and burning, marauding friend and foe alike, causing Karl to send Stanislaus with General Rehnsköld to Poland to endeavor to reduce these disorders.

Peter, finding it impossible to maintain an army any longer in a country so ruined and desolate, and pursuing his waiting policy, left the Diet of Lublin to their deliberations and fell back on his base in Lithuania, daily strengthening his forces and filling the courts of Europe with his complaints against Karl and his demands for the return of Patkul.

This left Stanislaus sole master of Poland, and the power of Karl was at its height; his camp at Altranstadt held envoys from all the princes of Europe, seeking his favor, endeavoring to discover his plans and to gain his alliance.

In this moment Karl gave little thought to Peter, save to issue scornful orders for the suppression of his predatory bands of Tartars and Cossacks.

Karl now turned his attention to the Empire, and in revenge for a slight he thought he had received at the hands of the Emperor's chamberlain, he demanded reparation from Joseph in the haughtiest terms, insisting not only on the banishment of the offending Count Tobar, but on that nobleman's delivery into his own hands, and the surrender of the Muscovite refugees that had escaped over the frontier into Austria.

This abuse of the law of nations passed without a

murmur in Europe, so powerful was Sweden, as did also Karl's demand that their ancient privileges be restored to the Protestants of Silesia.

Joseph humbled himself as Augustus had done, and the court of Vienna was as humble as that of Saxony.

"If the King of Sweden had asked me to turn Lutheran I should have been obliged to do it," said the Austrian, in reply to the papal nuncio's protests.

Peter heard these things with outbursts of fury, but continued to accept the German officers secretly sent him by the feeble Emperor.

He was in Lithuania, occupying his days with training and hardening his troops, endeavoring to rouse Europe to save Patkul, and watching the increasing splendor of his terrible enemy, when Hélène D'Einsiedel, who had made her way from Dresden amid incredible difficulties, forced her way into the Czar's presence and besought him, in the accents of a creature distracted, to rescue her lover.

"I am helpless," said Peter, with a dreadful look at the livid face of the wretched girl.

"He will be executed—in the most horrible way," whispered Hélène. "We were to have been married this autumn."

"Child," said the Czar kindly, "I have done what I could. I do not need a woman to urge me to this duty." He looked away from where she knelt, huddled on the dirty floor at his feet, in her dusty traveling dress, all grace and beauty crushed out of her. "I will break Sweden," he added.

"What is that to me," cried Hélène, "if Patkul dies?"

"Would it not be something," asked Peter, "to have revenge?"

She appeared not to hear him; her distraught mind was concentrated on one thing only that was stronger than her fatigue or her despair—the effort to save Patkul.

"Cannot you, who are an Emperor, do this?" she implored.

Peter turned fiercely to Mentchikoff.

"Take away this woman," he said, "I cannot endure it."

The shuddering creature staggered to her feet before the officers could touch her, and flung out her poor, feeble hands with a shriek.

"They will break him on the wheel!" she wailed. "Oh, let me die first!"

Peter had looked on many frantic women before, and heard similar words often enough. The wives, mothers and sisters of the Strelitz executed in the Red Square, many of them by Peter's own hand, had comported themselves in similar fashion, mad with grief and horror, and he had given them never a glance, yet the anguish of this fond creature, who had traveled so far and through such perils that she was half-crazed with terror and fatigue, to demand a protection it was out of his power to bestow, moved him terribly; he could not bear to look on her, and she was forced from his presence and given to the charge of the servants who had come with her on this desperate journey.

"Let Katherina go to her," muttered the Czar. "Katherina has a gentle mind and a soothing tongue."

For himself he sought Mentchikoff, that firm and tireless friend.

Throwing an old mantle about his shoulders, for this autumn was unusually chill, even for the North, he mounted his great, rough horse and rode to the quarters of the Prince that were far more comfortable than his own.

He was humiliated and struck to the heart; with an impatience and gloomy bitterness he eyed his huge encampment; what use was it to train these men who fled at the very name of the King of Sweden? What good his pains, his example, his rewards, his punishments, to mold a nation uncivilized in every art and science?

The reactionary party was still at work; there were eager hands ready to undo his every reform; his heir, son of the repudiated Eudoxia, was a weakling, none of the children of Katherina, his chosen woman, had lived.

Almost his task seemed too great for the Russian; the war had been long and entirely disastrous; if it had taught him the art of war, it had done so in lessons rude and bitter.

His allies had fallen away from him; his enemy was in every way triumphant, had eclipsed his glory, dimmed his rising renown, made him and his attempts at greatness a laughing-stock.

Europe would not even listen to him when he complained of Karl's breach of international law and demanded his ambassador; instead they sent their representatives to do homage to the conqueror in his camp. The Emperor of Austria cringed, Europe was at the feet of this young man—in truth a second Alexander, who had but to decide in which direction his further glory should lie; and no one troubled about Muscovy and its passionate ruler, so fiercely trying to educate his country into some semblance of his ambitious dreams.

"Sweden blocks me," said Peter to Mentchikoff. "He must go, or all we have done is in vain. He stops my progress, Danilovitch; he wants to pull down, I to build. What am I to do—it seems that he is invincible."

He spoke without malice or hate now, only with a sadness that was wistful in its sincerity.

"And Patkul!" he added. "Patkul will be broken, Danilovitch."

"I would we could break Augustus," said the Prince.

"With my own hands," remarked the Czar, "I would put him to the torture. That little thing came from Dresden to ask me to save Patkul—and I can do nothing!"

It was the bitterest mortification to which he had

ever been subject in a life full of vicissitudes; Mentchikoff knew it and scowled; he could not endure to glance at the cruel position in which his adored master found himself; his own whole being was absorbed in a deep hatred of Augustus and the Swede.

But he had a greater faith in Peter than Peter had himself; the Czar might be torn with doubts and fears, but the subject was certain of the ultimate downfall of the Swede.

Peter, with an effort, it seemed, to shake off the gloom that was settling on him, asked Mentchikoff for a certain Pole who had been employed as a spy in the camp at Altranstadt, and who had lately returned to Lithuania.

"I would like to see him," said the Czar somberly.

"But he knows nothing," replied Mentchikoff; "nothing—I have already examined him."

"He knows," returned Peter, "something of the life of the King of Sweden—bring him here, Danilo-vitch."

Mentchikoff was reluctant to do this; he felt that it was morbid for Peter to be so interested in the habits of his rival and a certain slight to his own dignity, but he did not dare refuse, and the Pole, a tall, thin fellow with red eyes and sandy hair, was brought before the Emperor. Peter eyed him gloomily.

"Prince Mentchikoff tells me that you discovered nothing at Altranstadt," he said.

"Sire," replied the Pole, with a movement as if he would prostrate himself before the Czar, "how can one discover the secrets of a King who has no confidants?"

"I think he has no secrets either," remarked Peter, "his design is clear enough. He wishes to dethrone me."

"Yet that is not clear, sire," answered the spy earnestly. "All the princes of Europe have envoys at his camp trying to find out his plans, each begging for his favor and alliance. And he is dumb to all."

The Czar glanced at his friend.

"A proud position, Danilovitch!" he said. "A proud position!"

"They wonder," resumed the spy, eager to show that he had not been altogether useless, "why he lingers so long in Saxony—there are many comments as to that. He cannot," added the Pole, who knew that he might safely speak of the humiliation of Augustus to Peter, "further lower the Elector who has even written a letter of congratulation to Stanislaus Leczinski."

"May every ill overtake him for it!" exclaimed Peter in a loud voice, and with a suffused face.

"He has even, sire, had the mortification of having to deliver his favorite, General Fleming, to the King of Sweden who claims him as his subject, and only the entreaties of Stanislaus Leczinski stayed Karl from putting him to death."

Peter was not interested in General Fleming, and was impatient of hearing of what he considered further vileness on the part of the Elector, whom he regarded as one dead and damned—no longer to be taken into account, and only to be remembered to have his memory cursed.

"Tell me how the King of Sweden lives," he demanded, fixing his soft, dark, bloodshot eyes on the ferret-like face of the spy.

"Sire—as he has always done—he is the worst housed, the worst served and fed in his army. He never touches wine, and his food is plain and scanty, his bed a straw pallet. It is his pleasure to inure himself to every kind of fatigue and hardship. He rides out three times a day, and has no amusements or diversions of any kind."

Peter looked at Mentchikoff, regardless of the presence of the Pole.

"Think what a man I could be, Danilovitch!" he cried enviously, "could I so control myself!"

"Peter Alexievitch," replied the Prince hotly, "do

you seek to compare yourself with this hard, heartless automaton?"

"It is a wonderful thing," insisted the Czar, "for a man to be so master of himself."

"It is their manner in Scandinavia," said Mentchikoff. "They have few passions and dull appetites. But Karl boasts himself too soon if he would be above humanity—he takes his revenge on Patkul!"

The spy glanced furtively at the two Russians, not himself daring to enter on ground so delicate.

"Where is he better than us wretched mortals in that?" added the hot-hearted Prince.

"Indeed," said the Pole, "he is quite hard in these things. He has never been known to grant mercy to those who offend him. There was a Livonian officer captured and sent to Sweden, sire, and there in Stockholm judged and condemned to death. The King would not listen to any entreaties, but this soldier persuaded the Swedes that he knew the secret of the philosopher's stone, and the Queen-Mother sent to the camp to know if she might offer pardon to the man in exchange for his secret. But the King replied that he could not do for interest what he had refused to do for compassion. And the officer was beheaded."

Peter had listened intently, his eyes full of a dark fire.

"Did the King believe that the man knew how to make gold?" he asked keenly.

"Sire, it is said that he did," replied the Pole, "for a pure bar of gold was sent him that the prisoner had made in his cell before the Swedish councilors."

"Then," exclaimed the Czar, "this action shows a certain grandeur in him!"

But Mentchikoff was quick to seize on another aspect of the tale.

"Did you say this fellow was beheaded?"

"Yes, excellency."

"And Patkul is to be broken on the wheel—and his crime is equal to that of this man. Where is the

grandeur in that, Peter Alexievitch? Not the offense but the man is punished by this cruel sentence."

At this mention of his unfortunate general, Peter's brow darkened again.

"Whether such a man as this is to be respected or not, I cannot say—but he is to be feared, Danilo-vitch!"

The Czar then turned abruptly to the spy.

"Is there no whisper in Altranstadt as to Sweden's future designs?" he asked.

"Sire, there are many whispers. He has sent envoys into Persia and India. The Sultan has sent an ambassador to him returning the Swedish prisoners who fled into Turkey; his officers have always boasting stories on their lips of what he will accomplish."

"And they are right!" exclaimed Peter. "What may not this man, twenty-five, hardy, fearless, never defeated, and whose feats of arms have astonished the world, expect to achieve?"

"Nothing that you cannot thwart him in," replied Mentchikoff, who did not like his master's attitude of admiration for his enemy.

The Czar took no notice of this remark but continued to question the spy.

"He never looks at women, this Swede? There is no one who influences him?"

"No one, sire. For him it seems as if women did not exist. When he is forced to meet them he treats them with a freezing coldness—and avoids them when he can. They say he favored one woman when he was in Stockholm, but she died soon after he left for the war."

"Indeed," said the Emperor, who could hardly conceive of a life of such austerity, "if he has never been drunk or in love or in a passion, he is hardly human—and the more dangerous."

"He is neither invulnerable nor invincible," remarked Mentchikoff.

Peter suddenly flashed him a warm smile, Google

"You are jealous for my dignity, Danilovitch," he said. "I love you for it. And it is true that I am not defeated yet, nor old nor sick, and I have still to try conclusions with the Swede. Twenty times has he driven me out of Poland—and twenty times have I returned."

But his heart was not as brave as his words; despite himself his continued ill-success had induced in him a conviction of the invincibility of Karl whom he admired for possessing all the qualities he would have wished for in his own character, and whose glory, now at its most dazzling height, a little blinded the eyes of Peter. He alone knew the magnitude of the task that he had undertaken, the chaos of his armies, and the factions in his court and among his people.

Not even Mentchikoff could gauge the difficulties on which Peter labored on that long hard road, unenlivened by any success or encouragement, which he had set himself to travel.

CHAPTER III

IF the splendor of Karl's achievements dazzled even Peter, to the rest of the world it was indeed overwhelming.

This monarch, still in the first flower of his youth, found himself in a position unique in the history of the modern world.

Louis XIV had begun his reign by conquests perhaps as considerable, but his victories had been won by proxy; his cause was not so fine nor his behavior so remarkable, and his vanity had taken a form more ordinary, his pride had assumed the proportions to which men are most accustomed.

But both the achievements and the character of Karl were extraordinary; his victories were owing to his personal genius, the discipline of his army to his own efforts, the austere behavior of his men, so rare in the soldiers of a conquering army, to his own example.

There was no danger or hardship that he had not shared with his meanest soldier, and if they did not cherish that warm devotion for him that men have felt for leaders more human in their weaknesses, at least they accorded him an awed respect that did not permit them to murmur at his most severe regulations.

They had come, too, to believe that while under his leadership they were invincible, the one reverse they had received having taken place while he was absent; they told each other that Mentchikoff would never have beaten the Swedes at Kalisz had they been commanded by Karl; in his heart Peter had thought the same.

The summer was waning, and still Karl remained at Altranstadt; Count Piper, now become a feeble and

sickly man through the effect of a sudden illness, watched with a dull, half-cynical eye the glory of his master, and his place was largely taken by Baron Görtz, the grand-marshal of the Bishop of Lubeck, whose daring spirit and military enthusiasms entirely suited the peculiar temperament of the King.

Stanislaus now reigned in Poland with as much security as was possible to one who owed his elevation to a whim of fortune, and who ruled a country so torn and exhausted by war; he had been recognized by the leading courts of Europe, including that of Dresden, and in this direction at least the ambition of Karl was satisfied.

Among those who came to Altranstadt to endeavor to discover the policy or gain the alliance of the redoubtable conqueror who had just humbled the Empire was a man whose fame as a captain had rivaled that of Karl, though in all save military genius he was different from the Swede.

This was the English general, John, Duke of Marlborough, sent by the English Government to sound Karl on the likelihood of his joining the war of the Spanish Succession, either for or against the allies.

This the Duke, as able a diplomat as he was a soldier, hoped to discover by proposing Karl as a mediator between the allies of France, a design that he thought would flatter the King into disclosing his real intentions.

Karl, who had treated with a cold indifference the other ambassadors and plenipotentiaries who had waited on him, showed some eagerness to meet this man who had never fought a battle that he had not won, nor besieged a town he had not taken, and whose brilliant genius had broken the mighty power of France.

The Duke himself had applied to the Baron Görtz for an audience, and by him and the English minister was taken to Karl's plain and severe quarters at Leipzig, where he then was.

The King received him in a small room without hang-

ings or carpets, and with no furniture save a few chairs and a table of bare wood; he had with him Count Piper, who looked ill and vexed; the minister was prejudiced against the Englishman because he had applied to Görtz instead of to himself for this audience.

The Duke of Marlborough entered with a light step the poorest royal chamber he had ever seen, and saluted Karl with a courtier's bow; these two remarkable captains faced each other with a flash of curiosity that for a second obscured all other matters.

The Duke was then nearly sixty years of age, but still of an unusual handsomeness and an infinite grace in his person; he was attired in the extreme of the fashion, black velvet brocade, white satin waistcoat flourished in colored silks, a rich Mechlin cravat and ruffles, a black satin cravat and a diamond buckle, a long curling peruke framing his worn, charming, and vivacious face.

He was both perfumed and powdered, and carried an elegant little sword with brilliants in the hilt.

The interest died from Karl's blue eyes and a look of cold disgust took its place; the Englishman was not the Swede's idea of a warrior. Nor was Karl in his old jackboots, worn blue great-coat with the rubbed leather buttons, his black taffeta stock and soiled leather gloves, his stiff air and ungracious look, the Englishman's idea of a King.

Karl wore a light peruke and a three-cornered hat; his face was impassive and cold, and he gave a bare salute in return for the Duke's greeting.

Marlborough was not in the least disconcerted. He had the perfect ease of manner born of long acquaintance with princes and rulers, and was an adept in dealing with all manner of men.

He was as ready with his opening compliment as if he had met with a gracious reception.

"Sire," he said in French, "I should be happy if I could learn under your orders what I do not know of the art of war."

Karl received this in a freezing silence; it was the type of flattery that he most disliked, and he had taken a complete aversion to the elegance of the great Englishman's appearance and to his courtier-like manners.

Marlborough, in no way discomposed, entered agreeably into further compliments, since it seemed that it was he who must make the conversation.

He spoke in French, and Karl, who knew this language but would never use it, replied in Swedish, of which tongue the Duke was wholly ignorant.

The English minister interpreted, and the conversation on general topics became slow and fatiguing. The English envoy was not in any way thrown out by this.

He wished to discover if Karl was likely to interfere in the war between France and the allies; he was dangerously near and had severely treated the Emperor, the most doubtful member of the league against Louis XII.

This object the Duke believed he could attain by merely watching the King of Sweden.

Karl, who knew his design, and disdained all those whom he thought were wanting his favor or alliance, broached the subject with a cold bluntness.

"I wonder your grace takes the trouble to concern yourself in this affair. I gave my word seven years ago not to meddle in this war."

Marlborough bowed gravely; he did not believe that anyone would sacrifice power and interest to their word; he was too well used to the ways of princes to be greatly impressed by what Karl said.

Perfectly at his ease and with a charming smile he studied this imperious boy who had put Northern Europe under his foot.

With that graceful composure so natural to him he began to talk of the war with France, naming some of the victories of the allies.

Karl could not listen without interest to any matter

connected with military affairs, and he had a natural prejudice against the French, so he remained silent, resting his hands on the hilt of his great plain heavy sword that he held in front of him, and followed with attention what the Duke was saying.

But he was as impervious to the charm of Marlborough as he had been to that of Aurora von Königs-marck.

Marlborough, who was used to swaying men and exercising a strong personal influence, soon perceived this.

"Sire," he said suddenly, his fine eyes keen, alert, and slightly amused, "why do I speak of these things to one who has accomplished so many greater ones? Your Majesty, who has already dethroned one King, and will another——"

Karl's eyes suddenly lit.

"Whom do you think I shall dethrone, my lord?" he asked, and signed to M. Robinson, the English minister, to quickly interpret his question.

"So you are human," thought Marlborough.

"Sire," he said aloud, "I was meaning the Czar of Muscovy."

Now there was no mistaking the fire that leapt into the cold eyes of Karl; he would not answer, but Marlborough read him plainly.

There was a little map of Muscovy, in colored paints, lying on a table by the window, and the Duke glanced at it as he spoke again.

"There can be no doubt," he continued, "that your Majesty's task will be as glorious as it will be tremendous."

When this was translated to Karl he turned imperiously to M. Robinson.

"Tell the Duke," he said, "that my designs are not disclosed even to my intimates."

This was a little softened in the translation, but Marlborough was fine enough to catch the full meaning of the words.

He was quite indifferent to this rude rebuff; he had discovered all he wished to know and continued to dis-

cuss indifferent matters, soon taking his leave, nor did Karl seek to detain him, but most coldly accepted his adieux.

As the two Englishmen went away in Baron Görtz's carriage, Marlborough whispered to the other:

"We need not trouble at all about that young madman—his one design is to dethrone the Czar—God help him!" he added, taking a pinch of snuff.

"Your grace thinks he will not succeed?" asked the English minister, who was secretly impressed by Karl's immense success and inclined to believe him invincible.

"My dear Robinson," replied the Duke suavely, "these heroes who feed on military glory are bound to die of hunger some day."

With which remark Marlborough, who was quite satisfied now that Karl would never trouble Western Europe, dismissed the famous captain from his thoughts.

Meanwhile Count Piper, left alone with the King, for Baron Görtz had retired with the Englishmen, turned to Karl and asked his opinion of the great Duke.

The King seemed to have forgotten his presence, for he had not spoken during the interview, and turned to him with something of a start, as if absorbed in dreams.

"What do I think of my Lord Marlborough?" he repeated; then he dismissed the Englishman with nearly as few words as the Englishman had dismissed him. "I do not think that he has the air of a warrior."

"He is very pleasant," remarked Count Piper, in a quiet tone that might have been sarcastic, "and so is Baron Görtz."

"Ah!" exclaimed the King, with a sharp look. "You do not like him."

With that Karl paused; he was just enough to know that Piper had no cause to like the younger man who was supplanting him and whose views were so opposed to his own.

"Count," he added, "I have always honored you and always shall. If I have not always taken your

advice I have at least respected you for giving it—but I am one who goes his own way. As for Baron Görtz, he is, and will be, what you are not, and will not be, my tool."

This was a long speech for Karl to make and he was suddenly silent, as if he already repented having said so much and so exposed his feelings.

Count Piper flushed; he knew that by these words the King had paid him the greatest compliment and the greatest kindness that he was capable of, and that he need look for no further recognition from his master.

He had long ceased to care much what Karl did and entirely to cease to hope to influence him; he could smile now at himself for ever supposing that he could have done anything with this young man, or moved him by means of Viktoria Falkenberg.

He felt himself to be a man whose strength and position were both almost lost, and he was, perhaps, a little indifferent now to what had gone to make his life, but, for the last time, he resolved to sound the mind of the King—on two matters that he, Piper, had much at heart.

"Sire," he said quietly, "all these princes and potentates come here with one object—to discover your Majesty's future designs."

"Yes," answered Karl, "and you know better than any man that I have disclosed these to no one."

"I do not seek," replied the minister, "to endeavor to force your Majesty's confidence."

"But you want to know something," remarked the King, with his sudden, ugly smile.

"Yes."

"Well?"

Count Piper gave the King a straight look.

"I want to know if your Majesty has any thought of returning to Stockholm," he said, and he could not keep a certain earnestness from his tone.

"That thought is ever uppermost in your mind," replied Karl, not unpleasantly.

"It is seven years since you left your capital, sire."

"Well?"

"Sweden needs her ruler."

"Sweden is well governed."

"Not by her monarch."

"I do better things than govern Sweden," replied the King haughtily.

"Ah, sire—these conquests cannot, will not, benefit Sweden. The scope of the war was attained years ago."

Karl was silent; he narrowed his cold blue eyes and stared at the grave face and commonplace figure of his minister.

"And now you would risk all in a campaign against Russia."

"Risk?" exclaimed Karl.

"There is a risk, sire."

Karl smiled contemptuously.

"And if you lose, it will be disaster for Sweden," added the Count.

"If I lose?" repeated the King, with rising wrath.

"Do you not know that it is impossible for me to lose?"

"Ah, sire!" murmured the minister sadly.

Karl suddenly laughed, throwing back his head and showing his fierce white teeth.

"You think that the Czar of Muscovy can defeat *me!*" he said.

The minister answered:

"Marlborough thinks that you attempt the impossible, sire."

The King was really angry now.

"What does Marlborough know of my designs?" he demanded.

"It is the common thought that you march on Russia."

Karl rose with an impatient movement.

"Let be this matter," he said sharply. "What I do, I do, and am accountable to no one."

This was what the Count had expected; he bowed gravely.

He felt a sad certainty that the next subject he had to broach would be received with even more displeasure by the King; he resolved that it should not be on his conscience that he had not made the attempt.

"I would presume to ask one other thing," he said, with a certain effort.

"Ask what you will," replied the King, who had now regained his icy composure, "but it is useless, Count, to touch on my future designs."

"I would only speak on a small subject, sire—that of Patkul."

The King flashed him an ugly glance.

"What of Patkul?" he asked, in a cruel voice.

"Will not your Majesty think again of your orders to the court-martial—that he is to be tried and executed with the utmost severity?"

Karl was silent.

"That means," continued the Count, "that he will be broken on the wheel and quartered alive."

"You speak for a rebel?" demanded the King.

"Other rebels have received a death less cruel—might not your Majesty show the same mercy to Patkul?"

"You know in what he has offended me, Count Piper."

"Therefore I ask your Majesty to be lenient. The man is brave—he has served his own country—he is not a Swede—he was to have been married this autumn. Let him die without torture."

The King's face was ugly to look upon.

"It is such a chance for your Majesty," urged the minister.

"A chance?"

"To show the world that you disdain a vengeance only worthy of the Czar of Muscovy."

"You are a sick man and I forgive you," replied Karl, "but speak no more of this affair if you wish ever to come into my presence again."

CHAPTER IV

KARL, having sufficiently humiliated the Emperor and Augustus, and having firmly established Stanislaus on the uneasy throne of Poland, had no longer any need to prolong his stay in Saxony, and began that autumn of 1707 to make preparations for his departure.

At this moment everything seemed possible to him; no one knew what project he might have in mind or to what enterprise he might be directing his genius.

He had already threatened the Pope, who had interfered with the Emperor's signing of the treaty in favor of the Silesians, which Karl had wrung from him, and it was considered possible that he might meditate a descent on Italy by way of Persia and Turkey.

All the nations regarded him with terror and admiration, and most trembled as they noticed his preparations for departure from the country where he had completely triumphed over all his enemies.

His spirits rose as the time came for him to leave Saxony where he had been idle a year; even his own generals did not know what his destination was.

"Give me," he said to one of these, "the route from Leipzig to——"

Here he paused, not wishing to betray his secret, and added with a laugh—"to all the capitals of Europe."

This was brought him; at the top of the list was *route to Stockholm* in large letters.

Karl saw the meaning; he knew that the Swedes were longing to return home.

"I see," he said, "where you would lead me—but we do not return to Sweden so soon."

A few days after the army was in marching order, and proceeded through Saxony towards Dresden.

The forces of Karl consisted of 43,000 men, 8,500 cavalry, 19,200 foot, and 16,000 dragoons.

All the regiments were complete, and to many of them were attached supernumeraries. These did not complete the resources of Karl; he had an army of 20,000 men in Poland, under Lewenhaupt, 15,000 men in Finland, and new recruits were on their way from Sweden.

Karl had the satisfaction of hearing that on the first rumor of his approach the Muscovites in Lithuania, where the Czar was endeavoring to regain some of the ground Augustus had abandoned, had fled to Grodno, a hundred leagues from Lublin.

As the army approached the capital of Saxony, Karl, who always rode a few paces in front of his guard, galloped off with a few of his officers, giving no one a hint of his design, and throwing the whole army into consternation by his sudden disappearance.

The whim had taken him to visit Augustus, and within an hour of his leaving the army he had presented himself at the private apartments of the Elector, leaving his officers below.

Augustus was then in his bed-chamber, in poor health and melancholy humor, lounging in a white brocade dressing-gown by the wood fire, while Aurora von Königsmarck, who had recovered something of her ancient splendor, but who was also negligently gowned in pink taffetas, frothed the chocolate over a silver lamp.

Count Fleming, the Elector's minister, had seen the King enter the town, and had rushed to advise his master; but Karl, who had entered the gates under an assumed name, and passed as a member of the King's guard, was before him, and had entered the chamber of Augustus before that prince knew that he was in the town.

Augustus vested himself in haste, being utterly bewildered and amazed.

"The King of Sweden in my ante-chamber!" he kept saying.

Aurora was deeply angry.

"He comes to exult over you," she said. "Before he goes on fresh conquests he wishes to satisfy himself with the sight of the King he has discrowned."

"It will give me an opportunity to speak for Patkul," said Augustus. "Surely he will not refuse me that favor."

"He will," replied the Countess, "but he is in your power."

"Bah!" said the Elector, annoyed at this womanish point of view, "I am in his."

Aurora could hardly restrain her impatient scorn; every time, according to her ideas, that Augustus was called upon to show strength, he showed weakness; she had long ceased to feel either affection or respect for the Elector, and in secret scorned herself for the love of comfort and luxury that induced her to stay with him, and accept the tarnished splendor Augustus had secured by the treaty of Altranstadt.

She had felt keenly the failure of her ruse to secure the release of Patkul; day and night she was haunted by the last glimpse she had had of H  l  ne D'Einsiedel, as, half-crazed by horror and fear, she had set out on her wild journey to the Russian camp.

"You could keep him," she persisted. "It was one of his madman's whims to come."

"He has an army, an invincible army, at the gates," replied Augustus.

"Ah, you have not the courage," replied the Countess, who had become sharp-tongued in adversity. "But why do I speak to you? If you had had courage you never would have signed the peace."

"God save me from your railing!" replied the harassed Elector. "Between you and the King of Sweden I have had a merry life these last seven years!"

Aurora shrugged the fair shoulders that rose out of her ruffled lace gown, and flung herself into a chair.

"At least endeavor to save Patkul," she said bitterly.

She suddenly turned and looked at him over her shoulder, her beautiful eyes fierce.

"If Patkul dies—*that way*," she flung out, "I shall never forgive you."

The Elector did not answer; hastily dressed and red in the face he flung open the folding doors that led into the room where the King of Sweden waited.

Strangely out of place in this chamber of gilt and satin, with the rose-wreath cupids painted on panels and ceiling, the ormolu tables and bric-a-brac of china and silver, looked the stern figure of the Swede.

His worn high boots were covered with road dust; his attire, plain as that of the trooper he had represented himself to be at the gates, set off his tall, robust figure; his hands, in the long elbow gloves, were clasped about the handle of his heavy sword; his light peruke was held back by a black ribbon, and his hat hung on the back of the chair.

He arose as Augustus entered, and gave him a brief salutation.

"I did not think that your Majesty would have thus far honored me," stammered the Elector, flushing deeper.

"I could not leave your Highness's country without coming to bid you farewell," returned Karl calmly.

He showed no trace of triumph over, or sympathy with, the man he had discrowned; his manner was that of one casual acquaintance with another.

"I would like to see your fortifications," he added, and a flicker of his unpleasant smile crossed his calm face.

Augustus had to make an effort to preserve his equanimity; the humiliations forced on him by Karl were too recent and too bitter even for one of his good nature to endure without fierce resentment.

But he knew that Karl, though seemingly in his power, had an army at the gates that could reduce his capital to submission in a few hours.

Also, all that was best in him longed to redeem the shameful delivery of Patkul into the hands of Karl, and he thought this was an opportunity to ask this one favor that the King of Sweden could scarcely refuse.

The conversation became forced and general; the Elector invited Karl to dine with him and the offer was accepted.

Augustus and Count Fleming sat down to table with Karl and his general, and some sort of conversation, embarrassed on the part of the Saxons, and indifferent on the part of the Swedes, took place.

The Conqueror ate bread and drank water, and Augustus drank heavily of every wine that was offered to him, to give himself courage for the coming interview with Karl, in which he would ask the life of Patkul.

The meal being over the Elector conducted the Swedes round the fortifications, and while the King was a little ahead took occasion to ask General Hord, one of the Swedish officers, if he thought his master would grant him a favor.

"I think," added Augustus, "that he will not refuse a small request to a man from whom he has taken a crown."

"What is this small request of your Highness?" asked General Hord dryly.

Augustus flushed; his whole position was one of cruel humiliation, and he liked the Swedish officers little better than he liked their master.

"I want the life of General Patkul," he replied, with an air as easy as he could manage. "I hardly think," he added, with a forced smile, "that your master will refuse me."

"You do not know him," replied the Swede dryly. "He will certainly refuse you."

"Why?" demanded the unfortunate Elector, with some sharpness.

"First, because it is you want a boon that he will grant no one."

The Elector could not refrain from a bitter retort to this brusque statement.

"Is then the King of Sweden so cruel?"

"Sir," said the Swede, "he is just. Patkul is a traitor."

"Will not an easier death content your master?" asked Augustus.

"You will find that he will alter nothing," smiled General Hord.

The Elector, however, could not believe that Karl could be so deaf to all promptings of clemency, chivalry, and courtesy.

"He is my guest," he urged.

"For that very reason he will refuse you more certainly. The fact that he is nominally in your power will make him scornful of any concession to you. He will also disdain to accord any favor to you that he would not give to anyone else."

But Augustus was not convinced, and if he had been, possessed sufficient nobleness to persist in his endeavor to save Patkul.

When they returned to the palace he opened the subject, nervously, but with a certain dignity.

"I regard myself as doubly fortunate in this visit, as I have something on my mind and conscience to put before your Majesty."

Karl gave him one darting glance, then seated himself, resting his gloved hands on the plain hilt of his sword.

He had flung off his hat, and his eyes shone cold and clear beneath the straight fair brows and smooth low forehead, shaded by the curls of his light peruke.

Seen thus, in perfect composure and repose, the face was beautiful, marred only by the slight overfullness of the lips and the little ugly twist of them, half a smile, defects not noticeable in his extreme youth, but now becoming permanent. His complexion, despite his outdoor life, looked fair and clear as a woman's above the black satin stock, and there was no line or shade of thought or emotion to soften or enlighten those cold and noble features.

Augustus, richly though carelessly dressed, his soft handsome features disturbed and harassed in expression, and worn with anxiety and sickness, his laced and brocade clothes hanging loosely on the powerful figure

that had lost so much of its strength, was in piteous contrast to the man who had ruined him so completely and steeped him in such utter humiliation.

"I think we have done with matters of business," Karl reminded him. "I came as one prince taking farewell of another; would it not be as well for us to leave our meeting at this friendly point?"

This was clearly meant as a warning, but Augustus would not take it; he turned pale, and took a rapid step across the room; his heart swelled and his pleasant eyes darkened with the inner emotion he kept in check.

"It is against my conscience to remain silent on this matter," he said.

"Your conscience, Highness?" repeated Karl, without changing a muscle of his face or altering a tone of his voice, yet conveying, by the very impassivity of his attitude, unspeakable contempt for the man who had been beaten into signing the peace of Altranstadt.

Augustus flung up his head.

"I wish, I must," he replied, "speak on a delicate matter—one that I shame to mention, one in which I am at the mercy of your Majesty."

"Ah!" exclaimed Karl, as if he suddenly saw what was coming.

"I mean to speak of General Patkul," said the Elector, steadily but hoarsely.

"You will speak in vain," answered the King of Sweden, with the utmost coldness.

"I cannot think so, sire. I appeal to your chivalry, your clemency, to have mercy on this man—and mercy on me," added the wretched Elector, clutching his hands in his ruffles. "If Patkul dies I am ashamed before the world."

"Did you not think of that when you signed the peace?" demanded Karl harshly.

"Sire, is there any need to thus humiliate me?"

"Humiliate *you*?" replied Karl, with the slightest possible stress on the last word.

The blood flamed into the Elector's thin cheeks. "Sire, we are cousins," he said passionately.

"Did you remember that our mothers were sisters when you plotted with Patkul to seize my Baltic Provinces?" demanded the King.

He spoke with the utmost calm, and with an air of moderation, but he contrived to emphasize the fact that the relationship to which the Elector had referred was on the female side only.

"I belong to my father's family," he added, in a fashion that showed contempt for all women.

Augustus did not know in what way to appeal to this icy character, this stern, harsh demeanor.

"I am at your mercy," he repeated in desperation, "a fallen and a ruined man. Your vengeance should be satisfied. What would it mean to you to save Patkul? But an added glory. He was to have been married—the lady is of my court, young and delicate and good. To gain some hope for her lover she has fled into the wilderness of Lithuania to appeal to the Czar."

"I have heard this before," replied Karl.

"Think how she suffered before she was reduced to this wild journey."

Karl rose.

"She has appealed to Peter," he said. "Let Peter answer her."

"But I," said Augustus, "appeal to you, sire."

The two splendid men, each drawn to the full of his great height, stood facing each other in the toy room, amid the frivolous elegances of silk and satin, china and gilt.

"At least," added the Elector, "accord him a death less cruel."

He spoke without fear and even with a certain authority, being profoundly moved, and, like many weak, emotional people, being strong enough in the actual face of what inflamed his passions.

Besides, he could not but feel that he was of equal birth with Karl, considerably older, and of wider ex-

perience, and that the young conqueror was doing a cruel wrong.

This tone, as of equal to equal, had never been heard by Karl since the day he had forever silenced it in the Queen-Mother, and it inflamed him to complete fury, which he did not betray, but which made his blood tingle and his pulses bound.

"I have nothing to give you but silence," he said, in a terrible voice. "I will take my leave, Highness."

Augustus, pallid to the lips with mortification, fell back before this bitter rebuff, and, turning for a second, covered his face with his hands. Karl picked up his hat and would have left without another word, but the folding doors opened and Aurora von Königsmarck entered and stepped straight up to him.

This beautiful woman was in full court dress, white and silver, and adorned with diamonds; she carried a long fan of white feathers which she pointed at Karl with a gesture of supreme disgust.

So full was she of vitality and passion that the King was stayed by her entry and stared at her bright vivid face.

"Patkul may die," she said, in a loud voice, "but he will be revenged. No man like you can triumph long. In the day of your disaster, sire, remember me—and that there was one person to scorn you and your glory, and know you for the little man you are."

She flung out this in a breath, then added, panting, "You vain, mad boy!" in a tone of utter contempt.

Karl stared at her, and the color slowly mounted up under his eyes; he gave a harsh, short laugh, turned on his heel, and left the room without a salute.

Augustus caught the Countess by the arm.

"What have you done!" he cried frantically.

She flung him off with a passionate gesture of scorn.

"I have done with you," she said. "Pray God your son will be a different man."

PART II

POLTAVA

"Nous n'avons de propre que l'honneur; y renoncer, c'est cesser d'être monarque."—*Peter the Great to Chofiroff.*

CHAPTER I

LADEN with the plunder of Poland and Saxony, the spoils of their brilliant feats of arms, the Swedes, amid the January ice, marched on Grodno, the several parties of Muscovites in the neighborhood flying at the mere rumor of their approach.

Peter, surprised in Grodno, fled with 2000 men, while Karl with 600 entered the city.

When Peter learned that the bulk of the Swedish army was still five leagues distant he returned and tried to retake the town.

He was, however, fiercely beaten back, and the Swedes pursued the Russians through Lithuania and Minsk, towards the frontiers of Russia.

Karl, after clearing Lithuania of the forces of the Czar, intended to march towards the North and on Moscow, by way of Pskof.

The difficulties in his way were terrible; huge stretches of virgin forest, of desolate marsh, of barren deserts, lay between him and his objective. The only food that could be found was the winter stores of the peasants in the small tracks of cultivated land, which were buried underground; many of these had already

been ravaged by the Muscovites, and in any case were insufficient for the Swedish army.

Karl, who was to be deterred neither by prudence, reason, nor fear of any kind, had provided bread for his men which they carried with them, and on this they had to support the ghastly hardships of the forced marches.

The heavy rains kept back even the indefatigable Swede. A road had to be made through the forest of Minsk, and it was early summer before Karl found himself once more face to face with Peter at Borissov.

The Czar waited with the main body of his forces to defend the river Bérézina; Karl, however, brought his troops across this river and marched on the Russians, who once more retreated, falling back on the Dneiper.

At Halowczin he defeated 20,000 Muscovites by traversing a marsh believed to be impassable, the King himself leading, with the water at times up to his shoulders.

After this decisive victory he pursued the Russians to Mohilew, on the frontiers of Poland; by the autumn he was chasing the Czar from Smolensk, on the Moscow road.

At Smolensk, narrowly escaping death in a hand-to-hand fight with the Kalmucks, Karl inflicted another defeat on the Muscovites, and proceeded another stage on the way to the capital, from which city he was now distant only a hundred leagues.

At this moment Peter sent to Karl suggesting the opening of peace negotiations.

But Karl replied as he had replied to Augustus: "Peace in Moscow."

And even Count Piper wrote to the Duke of Marlborough, whom he was keeping informed of the progress of the campaign, that the dethronement of the Czar was inevitable.

But Peter, still unshaken after the defeats of eight years, again gathered together his scattered and disheartened armies.

"The King of Sweden thinks to be a second Alexander," he remarked, when Karl's haughty answer was brought to him, "but I have no mind to be Darius."

The second winter of the Russian campaign was now setting in; it promised to be of unusual severity even for these bitter regions.

Even the Spartan endurance of the Swedes began to blench at the thought of the almost unendurable hardships of the long Russian winter, with neither sufficient food, firing, or clothing.

But there was no murmuring, for the King supported all privations equally with the poorest foot soldier.

The scouts brought in news that Peter had torn up the roads, flooded them from the marsh lands, cut down huge trees and flung them across the way, and burnt the villages on the route to Moscow.

There was barely a fortnight's provisions in the Swedish army and not the least prospect of obtaining any more in the ravaged, frozen wastes.

Karl called a council of war in his rough tent amid the giant pines.

There was no fire, and, as the tent flap swayed on its cords in the icy wind, a few flakes of snow drifted in and melted on the frozen earthen floor.

Karl sat in a folding camp-chair, a mantle of rough blue cloth over his usual uniform, his hands, covered by the long elbow gloves, employed in turning over a few notes and maps on a plain pine table.

The arduous labors and unceasing fatigues of this last campaign had told even on his superb physique.

He was thinner and pale, under the brown of exposure; his blue eyes seemed slightly tired, but had lost nothing of their calm, courageous stare.

Near him sat Count Piper, looking ill and old, wrapped in a heavy cloak of marten skin, lined with scarlet and gold brocade, the spoil of war of some flying Russian Prince.

Only a few of Karl's generals, such as Rehnsköld,

Gyllenburg, and Wurtemberg, were present; it was his habit to confide his designs to as few as possible. Piper, whose forebodings had been silenced by the splendid success of the Swedish advance into Russia, had now begun to feel uneasy and to rediscover all his objections to the campaign. He thought that Karl should have accepted Peter's offer to treat for peace; the barbarous country and the arctic climate told severely on his spirits; he was in poor health and homesick. Whatever sentiment he may have had left for his master had vanished when the cruel sentence on General Patkul was carried out, and he was broken on the wheel, suffering a death of frightful torture.

Piper had heard that H  l  ne D'Einsiedel had not lived to hear this news.

She had died in a Russian camp soon after her arrival there, and the messages Patkul had sent to her by the chaplain who attended him on the scaffold had been sent to one beyond the reach of comfort.

Piper never spoke of these things, but he often thought of them now that misfortune seemed at last to be overtaking his master.

He considered now that Karl was in the most dangerous position he had yet found himself in, and he did not hesitate to say so, unpalatable and unacceptable as he knew his advice must be.

"Your Majesty, in common prudence," he remarked, shivering a little in his furs, "can do nothing but await the arrival of Lewenhaupt."

This general, who was coming to Karl's assistance with 15,000 men and a quantity of provisions, was believed to be within a few days' march of the present Swedish camp.

He had, indeed, been some time expected, and his retarded arrival had been a matter of vexation to the stern King.

"I most strongly beseech your Majesty to consider this advice," added General Gyllenburg, with an earnest glance at the King.

Karl turned over the maps and papers without looking up.

His full mouth was set in an obstinate curve; to this arrogant conqueror, now face to face with his first check, any council of moderation was displeasing.

"We cannot, sire," urged Gyllenburg, "advance on Moscow with barely fifteen days' food." For he, in common with the entire army, believed this mad project to be the one Karl had really at heart.

"There is nothing we cannot do," replied Karl, who had indeed often achieved what had seemed to others the impossible.

But Piper was vexed.

"If your Majesty advances on Moscow, you advance on disaster!" he exclaimed.

The King gave him a cold stare.

"Are you not yet convinced that I never take advice?"

His bitter rebuke caused the minister's worn cheeks to flush.

It was long since he had given Karl any cause to silence him, so utterly had he refrained from counsels that were useless.

Karl took his face in his right gloved hand, with his elbow on the table, and looked up and round his little council.

"I propose," he said, in a manner that left no loophole for argument or suggestion, "to neither march on Moscow nor wait for Lewenhaupt." What third alternative there could be no one knew.

"I intend," added the King dryly, "to advance into the Ukraine, to pass the winter there, and continue the route to Moscow in the spring."

The haughtiness with which he made this announcement covered an inner mortification; he had thought to dethrone the Czar in a year; he had never meant to turn back once on the road to Moscow.

But having reviewed his army and taken stock of his provisions, even his daring could not advance to

what was certain destruction. To his listeners the present project seemed as mad as an advance on the Russian capital, but they did not venture on any comment.

With the fewest and barest words Karl proceeded to explain that he had made an alliance with Mazeppa, Prince of the Ukraine, the country of the Cossacks, who was in revolt against the Czar, and hoped to profit by the alliance of the Swede to defeat Peter.

This man, who dreamed to do for the Ukraine what Patkul had dreamed to do for Livonia, was a Polish nobleman of considerable parts; cast out of his own country by the vengeance of a compatriot, he had taken refuge amid the Cossacks, grown to be their ruler, and now in his old age essayed to play some important part in this momentous war.

"Is he to be trusted?" asked General Rehnsköld, who did not dislike the project as it was unfolded to him.

"As for that I do not know," replied the King coldly, "but his interests lie with me, and not with the Czar, for if Peter discovered his secret plans of revolt he would certainly impale him as he has threatened before. Mazeppa knows what to expect from the mercy and justice of the Czar."

Piper, thinking of Patkul, was silent, but Gyllenburg, thinking of nothing but the present crisis, ventured to remonstrate with the imperious King.

"Whether or no the Cossacks can be relied upon, were it not well to wait Lewenhaupt and his reinforcements—above all, his provisions?"

But Karl was, as always, obstinate; he had, he said, a rendezvous with Mazeppa on the banks of the Desna, whither that prince had promised to come with 30,000 men, treasure, and provisions.

Rehnsköld was prepared to credit that this was better either than pressing on towards Moscow or waiting for Lewenhaupt.

Piper and Gyllenburg were for remaining at Smolensk in expectation of reinforcements; Karl listened coldly

to all arguments, and remained fixed in his original plans.

The next day the army, to its intense surprise, received orders to march into the Ukraine. Messengers were sent to Lewenhaupt to tell him to join the main army on the banks of the Desna and the painful progress commenced.

It was yet autumn, but the cold had set in early, and the troops had to suffer the rigors of extreme cold.

Nature seemed bent on throwing obstacles in the way of the Swedes.

The forests, deserts, and marshes were nearly impenetrable; Lägercrona, in charge of the advance guard, went thirty leagues astray, and only after four days of wandering was able to find the route.

Nearly all his artillery and heavy baggage he had been obliged to abandon in the marshes or among the rocks.

When after unheard-of troubles and privation, Karl reached the banks of the Desna that the Prince of the Cossacks had appointed for a meeting-place, the ground was found to be occupied by a party of Muscovites.

The Swedes, though fatigued by twelve days' travel, gave battle, vanquished the Russians, and continued to advance into this desolate and unknown country.

Now even Karl himself began to be doubtful of the fidelity of Mazeppa, and uncertain as to his route.

Perhaps feelings of doubt and apprehension were beginning to touch him for the first time in his life, when Mazeppa finally joined the Swedish army.

He had, however, the worst of news to tell; Peter had discovered the plot in progress in the Ukraine, had fallen upon and scattered the Cossacks, capturing all the gold and grain and thirty Cossack nobles whom he had broken on the wheel.

Towns and villages had been burned, treasures carried off, and the old Prince had with difficulty escaped with 6000 men and a small quantity of gold and silver, of little use in a country where there was

no one to be bribed with gold and no commodity to buy.

Karl would have found a few wagon-loads of grain more to his liking. However, the Cossacks were useful if only from their knowledge of this wild country, though Karl despised them as soldiers and waited impatiently for the arrival of Lewenhaupt. But when this general finally made his way to the Swedish encampment, he had a tale to tell as disastrous as that of Mazeppa, and far more mortifying to the pride of the King of Sweden.

At Liesna he had been met by the Czar, and, after a fierce battle of three days, severely defeated.

He had continued to effect a magnificent retreat, but he had lost 8000 men, seventeen cannon, and forty-four flags, together with the entire convoy he was bringing to Karl, consisting of 8000 wagons of food, and the silver raised in Lithuania by way of tribute.

He had the satisfaction of knowing that Peter had lost 10,000 men, and that he had held him at bay for three days, but this could not balance the fact that he arrived at Karl's encampment with his army depleted and without either provisions, ammunition, or treasure.

Karl received this reverse with his usual cold gravity; he neither blamed Lewenhaupt nor took anyone into his confidence.

His situation, so lately that of an all-powerful conqueror, was now indeed dangerous, if not desperate.

He was cut off from Poland, and an attempt on the part of Stanislaus to reach him failed utterly.

No news came through from Sweden, and it seemed as if this army, lately all-powerful, was isolated from the rest of the world; they could neither communicate with, nor receive help nor advice from, any part of the globe.

But the worst of their distresses was the weather; this winter of 1709, long to be remembered, even in

Western Europe, as one of the most terrible on record, was almost insupportable in these arctic regions.

Karl, who ignored human needs and human weaknesses, forced his men to march and work as if it had been midsummer and they well fed.

Two thousand of them dropped dead of cold in their tracks.

The rest were soon reduced to a state bordering on misery.

There was no replenishing their clothes, half were without coats, half without boots or shoes; they had to clothe themselves in skins as best they might, and suffer and die as best they might, for the mad King tolerated no murmur, and such was his authority and the awe and respect that his very name inspired that his troops endured what perhaps no other general had induced men to endure before. Such food as kept them alive was provided by Mazeppa, who alone prevented them from perishing miserably.

The old Prince of the Cossacks had remained faithful to Karl despite the offers Peter made to him to induce him to return to his allegiance. The Czar, not wishing to appear inferior to his enemy in spirit or daring, advanced into the Ukraine, regardless of the frozen country and tempests of snow.

He did not, however, attack the King of Sweden, but merely harassed him by small raids on his camp, thinking that hardships and cold would have reduced them to extremity before succor could reach them.

News from Stockholm finally came to the isolated army.

Karl learnt that his sister, the Duchess of Holstein-Gottorp, was dead of the small-pox. This gentlewoman was but a faint memory to the King; it was eight years since this terrible and bloody war had been undertaken to replace her husband on his throne.

Karl had almost forgotten Stockholm; almost forgotten the cause of the war; the young Duke was dead, and had but a small place in the stern King's mind,

compared to the vast designs that had grown out of his quarrel.

Not till the first day of February did the snow permit the Swedes to move, and then it was amid terrible weather that Karl advanced on Poltava, a fort full of supplies that Peter held across the Moscow route.

The taking of this place was a necessity to Karl pending the arrival of his reinforcements, as his army was deprived of everything, and the resources of Mazeppa almost at an end.

The Swedish army was now reduced to 18,000 men, but besides these Karl commanded the Cossacks of Mazeppa, and several thousand Kalmucks and Moldavians, free lances attached to his standard by the love of booty and of glory.

With this force Karl advanced on Poltava; he had the mortification of finding that Mentchikoff had outmaneuvered him, and flung 5000 men into the town.

The King pressed the siege and had taken several of the outworks when he learnt of the approach of the Czar with 70,000 men.

CHAPTER II

KARL, returning to his camp after having beaten one of the advanced detachments of the Czar's army, was noticed by General Rehnsköld to be colorless as a man of stone, and when he came to dismount at the door of his tent, those who accompanied him observed that his boot was dripping blood, and the side of his horse soaked.

The Prince of Wurtemberg ordered his servant to run for a surgeon, and General Lewenhaupt caught the King's arm.

"Sire, you are wounded!" he exclaimed.

Karl, in his proud obstinacy and his desire to endure everything in silence, would have denied the fact even now, but the pain was so intense that he could not conceal it any longer, nor could he put his foot to the ground.

"A ball struck my heel," he said sternly.

"How long ago, sire?" asked General Rehnsköld anxiously.

"Soon after I left the camp," replied Karl.

The officers glanced at each other; they knew that this meant that the King had been over six hours on horseback since his wound, giving orders as usual, and not in any way betraying his pain.

Leaning on General Lewenhaupt's arm he entered the tent, his officers crowding in after him. It was still only early summer, but the air was dry and arid, and in the tent hot and close and full of a fine dust.

Karl seated himself on the plain folding-chair he always used, pulled off his gloves, and asked for a glass of water.

"This is an ugly mischance," he said coldly. "I should have liked to have met the Czar on horseback."

No groan or sigh passed his pallid lips, but his left hand gripped the side of the chair, and beads of agony stood on his broad forehead.

The surgeon entered, a little man with an eager face, one Neumann, well known for his great skill and learning in his profession; he was closely followed by two others, and the King's personal domestics.

"Gentlemen," said the King, lifting his blue eyes now dark with pain, "let us see how far I am unlucky."

He held out his foot to the servant as if he wished him to draw the boot off, but Neumann was instantly on his knees, and had taken the injured limb delicately between his capable hands.

It was necessary to cut the boot from the leg; when this was done it was found that the heel had been completely shattered, and that gangrene had set in; the instant opinion of the surgeons was that there was nothing but amputation to save the King's life.

Karl sat silent, his foot covered with towels, and resting on a chair; the pain was beginning to make him giddy, and, for the first time in his life, he was realizing what it might be to be unfortunate.

Hitherto he had deemed himself immune from such a chance as this; he had never conceived of his splendid body as in any way failing him, and now perhaps he was a maimed man for life.

The officers looked dubiously at each other; to them this came as a crowning misfortune; only the spirit, presence, and fame of the King had kept the army together amid all its miseries, and now, at the climax of their disasters, when their very existence depended on the taking of the stores and ammunition of Poltava, the King was struck down.

Count Piper came hurrying to his master's side; the minister felt that his worst prognostications, that for a time had been silenced by the steady successes of Karl,

were now about to be realized, and he felt a deep inner anger at the obstinacy that had landed them in this lost country, cut off from help, without resources of any kind, threatened by an enemy who was in his own country, and three times their number.

Karl perhaps read some of these thoughts; he looked at his minister with his usual coldness.

"Piper," he said, "they want to take my leg off.

Neumann looked sharply at the King, who he knew must be suffering torture.

This self-control will cost him something later on, thought the surgeon.

He lifted the towels and looked again at the wound from which the purple blood was welling, and staining the piles of linen laid beneath.

"If one cut, and cut deep enough, the leg could be saved, sire," he said boldly.

Karl looked at him straightly; it was one brave man facing another; the great King and the great surgeon met on the common ground of fortitude and daring.

"Do your work then at once, M. Neumann," said Karl. "Cut deeply and fear nothing."

M. Neumann bowed, and directed his assistant to bring him his case of instruments.

Karl asked for another glass of water, and leaning back, drank it slowly.

Several other officers had now entered the tent including Poniatowski, the commander of King Stanislaus' Swedish guards, who had followed Karl into the Ukraine out of affection for his person.

Karl showed some pleasure at his arrival, and held out his hand.

"Any news?" he asked.

"Nay, sire, the last scouts sent out have not returned."

"To-morrow we will attack again," replied Karl. "We must," he added, with an unusual earnestness in his tone, "take Poltava."

"If we do not," thought Count Piper cynically, "we are dead and damned."

He left the tent and passed to his own more luxurious quarters; he was much too sick a man to be able to watch the operation to which the heroic King was so calmly submitting, and too full of an increasing agitation and consternation to be able to command his feelings.

"Yet why should I care?" he asked himself, "Patkul was shattered like that sixteen times."

The news of the King's wound had now spread through the army, and there was a growing uneasiness among these hitherto invincible veterans, now ill-fed, ill-clothed, and ill-armed.

Returning presently to the King's tent Count Piper met General Rehnsköld with whom he was on bad terms, but who now stopped to tell him that the incisions had been made in the King's foot, which was now being dressed.

The minister, pale, restless, and dispirited, passed again into the presence of the King.

Karl, who had held the limb steady with his own hands while the surgeon used the knife, and had displayed not the least emotion, now sat on his bed while Neumann bandaged the leg.

He had just given orders for an assault on the morrow; his voice had not shaken or his hand trembled, but his face was pallid and damp, his lips curved in a slightly distorted smile.

Count Piper advanced, but before he could speak the Prince of Wurtemberg entered the tent with every sign of agitation.

"Sire," he said briefly, "I have just been informed that the Czar is advancing on us with his entire army."

Karl, with unshaken calm, looked at Rehnsköld.

"How many will that be, General?"

"We think, sire, about 70,000 men."

Karl had known this; he had merely spoken to gain

time; the intolerable pain was making it difficult for him to think clearly, and he realized that never had he needed to think clearly as he needed now.

Even his haughty spirit was forced to face the fact that he was in a desperate position, and one which most men would have judged as hopeless.

Cut off from all reinforcements or supplies, lacking everything, half his troops starving or sick, many bandits, untrained and unreliable, shut in between two rivers with no shelter or cover in a country so desolate and barren—and now helpless with a hideous wound—it might well seem that he was about to lose the fruits of nine years' victories, and be deprived, in one sharp moment, of that glory for which he had sacrificed himself and his country.

"Seventy thousand men," he repeated; he had himself but 32,000, of which only 16,000 were trained troops, but he remembered Narva, where the odds had been greater, and forgot the genius of Peter that in nine years had created a nation.

There was no council of war.

When Count Piper came to see the King that night he found him on his camp-bed, fully clothed, even to the boot on his uninjured foot, with sword and pistols, and a lamp on the table beside him.

The night was hot and breezeless; the sky cloudless, behind Poltava the moon was rising.

Karl lifted his eyes to glance at it as the tent flap was lifted.

"Are you wondering when you will see Stockholm again, Count?" he asked irrelevantly.

"I dream no more of Stockholm," replied Piper. "I came to see how your Majesty does."

"Very well," said Karl.

He moved the lamp so that the rays did not fall fully on his face; he was shivering and burning with fever, and knew it; he did not wish Piper to notice his condition.

"Have you seen Rehnsköld?" he asked.

"Yes, sire."

"He told you nothing?"

"Nothing."

Karl put his hand to his head, pushing back his short locks of fair hair that were wet with sweat; his whole body ached with pain, and his wounded foot was a fiery agony.

"Ah, well," he said, "I will tell you myself. We give battle to-morrow."

Count Piper lifted his head and looked sharply at his master; so desperate a resolution was what he might have expected from the King, yet it startled him, as a general may be startled by the trumpets sounding the retreat he has himself ordered.

In silence the minister stared at the King, whose noble face was in the shadow beyond the deep glow of the oil lamp.

"At last we are face to face!" cried Karl, with an excitement that he would never have shown but for the fever in his blood. "Peter Alexievitch and I, after nearly ten years! He has always fled from me—ever since Narva."

Sitting up in his bed, Karl reached out his hand for his sword, then let it drop while he stared at Piper.

"I met a man crying because he could get no news from his wife," remarked the King, "and another who was sad for fear he should not see Stockholm again; those who follow me must learn to forget family and country—" pausing, he again put his hand to his forehead. "Aurora von Königsmarck once foretold disaster for me," he added. "Had I been a greater prince if I had spared Patkul?"

Piper thought that the King must be delirious to talk like this; never had he known him to so unbosom himself, or to refer to these personal matters, or to speak in this tone of excitement; it frightened him to see his stern monarch thus reduced to ordinary humanity, and he went up to the bed and caught Karl's hand, which was burning hot.

The King, however, had again perfect command of himself.

He gazed at Count Piper with the usual serenity in the blue eyes now hot and blood-flushed with pain.

"I am still Karl XII," he said grimly, "and my men are still Swedes. Go to your prayers, Count, and leave me to my rest."

With this he lay down, and put his head on the hard pillow.

A faint, half-stifled sigh escaped him, then he lay silent and still, and either was or feigned to be asleep.

Count Piper did not leave the tent, but stood at the open door, looking sometimes at the tall figure of the King stretched on his narrow bed, and sometimes at Poltava, dark against the paling midnight sky up into which the moon was rising.

A sadness was on Count Piper and yet a calm; at that moment his was the clear vision of a man who has a premonition that his work is over, and looks back quietly and steadily on his life.

How differently he had dreamed it all!

What had he not meant to do for Sweden. Karl XI, his beloved master, had left his country greater than she had ever been before, and Count Piper had resolved to continue his work, to carefully add stone to stone till the fair edifice was complete—to do in his way and with his means what Peter was doing for Russia.

Instead there had been this nine years' war, empty of all but that glory that a day's mischance might eclipse forever.

Nothing had been done for Sweden—she had been drained of men, of money, left unprotected, her King a mere name.

There was no direct heir; it seemed as if a grandson of Karl XI would never rule in Stockholm, as if the fine line was at an end.

The King began to toss in the heat of the fever, and in his sleep a groan of pain now and then escaped him.

"Ah, you, what have you done for all of us with your heroic deeds?" muttered Count Piper; he came into the tent and looked at the tall figure in the blue coat, with the flushed fair face and loosened neck-cloth, sleeping the heavy slumber of an utter fatigue that was stronger than the torture of his wound.

Count Piper was certain of complete disaster on the morrow; he did not believe that there was the least chance of a success against the Czar.

He saw better perhaps than his master, how Peter had labored towards this moment, how he had learnt bitterly and painfully the art of war from many defeats; he knew that the Russians at Poltava would not be as the Russians at Narva.

He was aware also in what a desperate condition were the forces of Karl, how two winters in this terrible country had tamed their pride and lowered their faith in their own good fortune.

And if this bubble of Karl's invincibility was pricked, what then?

Nine years' brilliant success would be, in a moment, valueless; Europe but yesterday at Karl's feet would soon forget him, and Sweden, depleted of her men, penniless and abandoned by her King, would be a prey to the vengeance of her enemies.

Peter, bitterly offended by Karl's brief "peace in Moscow," and with many humiliations to avenge, would be no gentle foe.

In that moment Count Piper' almost hated the King.

He was foolishly glad of the twinges of agony that caused Karl to moan in his slumber, and when the King gave a half-unconscious murmur for water the minister made no movement.

It had been his own wish that he should be left alone till the dawn when he was to be roused for the battle.

"I will not interfere with his Spartan habits," thought the minister grimly.

He went to the door again and looked out on the fair night, opal pale, and the long encampment, colorless light and dark shade under the moon.

Count Piper thought as he had never thought before on the eve of any of the many battles at which he had been present, of the men sleeping now for the last time, of the distant homes they would never see again, of the Swedish blood that would water this arid soil tomorrow, and the Swedish bones that would crumble into the dust of this lost country.

Already the camp was full of movement; the beautiful horses of the Kalmucks and Cossacks could be seen moving among the tents, and here and there the moonlight fell on the steel of cuirass or the bosses of leather trappings, as the Swedish officers rode from one point to another fulfilling General Rehnsköld's orders.

Count Piper was preparing to go to his own tent for an hour's rest, if indeed his body could repose when his heart was so heavy, but a sudden exclamation from the King startled him into turning.

Karl was sitting up, his right hand flung out and grasping his sword.

His face showed ghastly in the mingled lamp and moonlight, his wet hair looked dark on his forehead, and his eyes were staring and congested from fever.

"I thought I was being broken on the wheel," he muttered in a low tone.

He tried to move, and the pulsing anguish the effort brought him made him remember his crushed limb.

"Faugh!" he exclaimed, in a tone of angry disgust. The sword dropped from his hand on to the earthen floor; he started, then peered at the silent figure by the door.

"Is that the dawn, Piper?" he asked, in a quiet, natural voice.

"No, sire, the moon."

"Send one to bid Neumann come and dress my wound. I would sooner be abroad than abed to-night."

"I, too, could not rest, sire."

"There will be time enough to rest when we are in Poltava," replied the King; there was a note of wildness in his voice foreign to his character; he seemed aware of this himself for he added fiercely: "Curse this fever—I have Peter's devils on me to-night. Fetch Neumann."

Count Piper bowed and turned away.

Thus, without a word or handshake parted King and minister on the eve of the Poltava fight.

CHAPTER III

FOR the second time the horses drawing the King's litter were killed—only three were left of the four-and-twenty guards who accompanied him.

Other soldiers hurried up, and began fastening fresh horses to the litter.

"Make haste," commanded Karl, "make haste." It was the thick of the battle; the beginning of the second attack which had begun at nine in the morning.

The first battle had been successful for the Swedes with a fierce onslaught of their famous cavalry; they had scattered the Muscovite horsemen, and taken the outposts of the Russian camp; General Creutz, however, who had been sent to reinforce the victors, lost his way, and the Czar, having time to rally, drove back the Swedish cavalry and captured Slippenbach, their general.

Karl was then about to send for his reserves that had been left with the camp and baggage when, with a brilliant movement, Prince Mentchikoff threw himself between the Swedes and Poltava, thus isolating the King's forces, and at the same time cutting to pieces a detachment that was coming to his assistance.

Meanwhile the Muscovite infantry were advancing on the main body of the Swedish army. When Karl heard of Mentchikoff's exploit he could not refrain from a bitter exclamation.

"Too well has he learnt from me the art of war!"

Quickly regaining his habitual composure he gave orders for a general battle, arranging, as best he might, his diminished forces.

He had now only four pieces of cannon, and was

beginning to lack ammunition; Peter had at least 120 guns.

It was one of the first volleys from these that had killed the King's horses and guards.

Karl shivered with rage as his glance swept over the battle, and he thought of the artillery that he had been obliged to abandon in the marshes and forests of the Ukraine, either through the weather or because the horses had perished, and he remembered with a pang the men who had dropped from cold and hunger on those terrible marches.

It was burning hot as the sun rose higher into the pale cloudless sky; the air was foul with dust and smoke, and full of curses, shouts, and orders, and the irregular booming of the Russian guns.

Before the horses could be harnessed to the King's litter, another cannon-ball fell near; again several of the guards were killed and the litter this time reversed, shattered to pieces, and flung on top of the King who was cast on to the trampled ground.

Four of his officers dragged him from the ruins; he was covered with dust and blood, and almost speechless.

The first line of the Swedes was beginning to fall back.

The swooning King perceived this, but he was almost past speech.

The Muscovite cannonade was so continuous and fierce that those about the King thought of retreating also, to get their master to a place of safety in the rear.

A stretcher was hastily constructed of pikes, and the King was raised shoulder high.

He raised himself on his elbow and cried out for his sword which he had dropped; they gave him this, and a pistol which he grasped in his left hand.

His blue eyes, inflamed with rage and pain, shot a desperate glance over the battle-field. On every side the Swedes were giving way; each line falling back

on the other, and the cavalry breaking at either wing.

"Swedes! Swedes!" cried the King.

Rallying his strength with a mighty effort he directed his bearers to take him to the head of several regiments, mentioning these by name. But it was too late; already everything was in irredeemable confusion; General Poniatowski forced his way through the mêlée to the King, and ordered the soldiers to take him to the rear.

Karl made a sign with his head that he would not go, but he could not speak.

"Sire," said Poniatowski, "the day is lost—Wurtemberg, Rehnsköld, Hamilton, and Stackelberg are prisoners."

It was doubtful if the King heard; he lay like one insensible, though his blue eyes were open wide and staring through the battle-smoke.

They were now being hotly pursued by a charge with bayonets, pikes, and swords; the intrepid Pole, though he held no rank in the Swedish army, rallied some of the Swedish horse round the person of the King.

Some of those supporting him had fallen, and he lay on the ground.

Poniatowski dismounted and shouted to the King's valet whom he saw pressing close; the little band of horsemen, guards, officers, and troopers, who did not number in all 500, but who were all that were left to Karl of his hitherto invincible army, kept off the fierce attacks of the Muscovites, while Poniatowski and the valet, with the help of a horse soldier, got the King up and on to Poniatowski's horse, a noble dark Arab.

Karl did not speak a word; he had tried to mount a horse at the beginning of the engagement, but had been unable to do so, and now the agony of his wound, the shock of his fall, the passion of rage and grief he was in, had so weakened him that he fainted twice while they were getting him on to the charger.

At last it was accomplished, and the valet, mounting behind his master, clasped him round his waist.

The anguish caused to his shattered foot by the movement of the horse brought Karl to his senses; but he was incapable of anything; he had dropped both his sword and pistol, and his head sank on to the breast of the young man behind him.

In this manner did the Swedish cavaliers, fighting off the fierce Muscovite attack every inch of the way, escort their unhappy master.

They had not reached their objective, the baggage camp (the other Swedish camps being already in the hands of the Muscovites), when Karl's horse was killed under him; one of the officers with him, Colonel Gierta, though sorely wounded himself, gave the King his mount, and again with infinite difficulty Karl was helped into the saddle.

The little troop, fighting through ten Muscovite regiments, at length brought the King to the baggage of the Swedish army.

The Russians were hotly pursuing them, and Poniatowski saw that a moment's delay might be fatal.

Among the baggage was the only carriage in the Swedish army, that of Count Piper.

The King was helped into this and the Pole, who by tacit consent had taken command of this band of fugitives, ordered a retreat with all haste towards the Dnieper.

He and the valet, Frederic, entered the carriage with the King, and supported him, as best they could, against the jolting on the rough roads.

Karl had not spoken a word since Poniatowski had conducted him from the field of battle; he now sat up, drew out his handkerchief, and wiped the sweat and dirt from his face, at the same time glancing at the blood that was soaking from his reopened wound on to the cushions and floor of the carriage.

"Where is Count Piper?" he asked.

His voice and face were calm, but the ghastly hue of

his usually fresh and glowing face told of his intense suffering.

"Sire," replied Poniatowski, "Count Piper is taken, with all the ministers. He came out to look for your Majesty, and wandered into the counterscarp of Poltava where they were taken prisoners by the garrison."

Karl gave not the least sign of emotion.

"And the Prince of Wurtemberg and General Rehnsköld?" he asked.

"They also are prisoners," said Poniatowski mournfully.

The King shrugged his shoulders

"Prisoners of the Russians!" he exclaimed. "Let us rather be prisoners of the Turks!"

He said no more, and the flight towards the Dnieper was continued.

Another misfortune overtook the unhappy King; a wheel of the carriage was wrenched off on the barbarous road, and there was no time to stop and repair it; he was therefore obliged to continue his journey on horseback.

The day was insufferably hot; they could find neither food nor water, nor was there any prospect of obtaining any in this desolate country, arid and uninhabited; several of the men were lost on the way or had dropped with fatigue; only a small number remained with the King.

These, towards evening, lost themselves in a vast trackless wood that was believed to stretch to the banks of the Dnieper.

Here, while they wandered about in the endeavor to find some road, the King's horse fell under him with fatigue, and no efforts could get Karl any further.

Blood-stained and soiled with dust and powder, without food, drink, or repose, maddened by the pain of his wound which increased with his fatigue, his spirit tortured equally with his body by the agony of defeat at the hands of the man he most hated, even the courage and endurance of Karl could support him

no longer, and though he was told that the Muscovites were searching for him in this very wood, he made no effort to move but crept under a great tree and lay there motionless.

Poniatowski put a horse-blanket under his head and sat beside him to watch, together with the few horsemen who now comprised the royal bodyguard.

As soon as the moon was up another body of fugitives, by rare good luck, came up with them.

These were Cossacks, headed by their hetman, General Mazeppa.

From them the Swedes learnt some further particulars of the battle.

The Muscovites had taken everything; baggage, guns, stores, such as there were, and the treasure consisting of 6,000,000 crowns in specie, the remains of the spoils of Poland and Saxony, together with many thousand men taken prisoners and many more slain.

Lewenhaupt, Mazeppa added, was flying towards the Dnieper with the remainder of the army; and he himself, added the old Cossack chief, had managed to bring away some mules laden with provisions, and a number of carts loaded with silver and gold.

Karl did not hear this news, either good or bad; he lay in a swoon of fatigue and pain, the moonbeams striking through the thick summer foliage on to his low fair head and blood-stained uniform.

Mazeppa glanced at him; their mutual disaster was so complete that any lamentation or even comment seemed grotesque.

The Prince said nothing, therefore, but with the fortitude that belonged to his character and his mode of life, directed that the food and water that he had brought with him should be distributed among the Swedes, then lay down on the grass and slept.

The next day the painful march was continued, and a juncture effected with Lewenhaupt on the banks of the Dnieper almost at the same moment as news was received of the approach of the Muscovites.

Lewenhaupt's men had not eaten for two days; they lacked powder, provision—everything; they had no means of crossing the river.

But their spirit did not fail them; they had been the victors in a hundred fights that even Poltava could not efface from their remembrance, and there was not a man among them who did not believe that, now their King had rejoined them, they would once more conquer, or else completely perish, selling their lives dearly. But the man on whom they relied was no longer the man who had led them to victory; Karl, whose wound was become poisoned and who was in a violent fever, unconscious of his actions, was hurried into a small boat that the army had with it, and taken across the Dnieper with Mazeppa and his treasure, which was afterwards obliged to be cast overboard to lighten the boat.

A few other craft having been found, a certain number of officers managed to cross the river, but the desperate Cossacks who endeavored to swim on horseback or on foot were all overwhelmed and drowned.

While the army was in this pass, Prince Mentchikoff, having found his way by the broken bodies of the Swedes along the route, arrived and called upon Lewenhaupt to surrender.

One colonel of this army that had been so long glorious hurled himself with his troop at the ranks of the enemy, but Lewenhaupt bade him cease his vain defiance.

It was all over now; everything was lost, even the chance of a glorious and splendid death; several officers shot themselves, others leapt into the waters of the Dnieper.

Lewenhaupt surrendered.

The remnant of that triumphant army that had so confidently marched out of Saxony was now in the hands of the Russians; slaves henceforth who might come to envy their compatriots who had perished of misery in the forests of the Ukraine.

The news of the end of his nine years' war was brought to Karl by the last fugitives who were able to cross the Dnieper.

He seemed incapable of understanding what was taking place, but lay silent in the poor carriage which was all that had been able to be procured for him. Without food, save the scantiest, and almost entirely without water, the little party traveled for five days across a desert country until they arrived at Oczakow, the frontier town of the Ottoman Empire.

The bureaucratic delays of the local officials hindered the progress of the fugitives into Turkey.

All the able negotiations of Poniatowski were unavailing, and pending the permission that was to come from the Pasha at Bender, the Swedes were forced to take what boats they could lay their hands on and cross the river Bug that lay between them and safety. The King and his immediate suite reached the opposite shore, but 500 men, the bulk of his little army, were captured by the pursuing Muscovites, whose cries of triumph echoed in the ears of the flying King.

So, sick, penniless, without hope or resource, his glory shattered in a day, his prestige gone forever, Karl XII entered Turkey, to throw himself on the mercy of the infidel.

CHAPTER IV

PETER ALEXIEVITCH now found himself in the position hitherto occupied by his rival.

The army that had foiled and humbled him ever since Narva was no longer in existence; the terrible Karl was in exile, without allies and with nothing to rely on but the exhausted resources of a distant and dispirited country.

The astute minister, Piper, the dreaded generals, Rehnsköld, Lewenhaupt, Wurtemberg, were all prisoners.

The Czar in one day had won the fruits of nine years of toil. More than half the Swedes were slain or slaves and there was no one to prevent his claiming the disputed Baltic Provinces.

Of the Poles he had no fear; he knew that Stanislaus could not stand without Karl, and that, if he had a mind, he might set up Augustus again.

In brief, he had made himself, in one battle, Arbiter of North Europe.

It was possible that Karl might endeavor to inflame Turkey into a revival of her old quarrel with him; but he had the remembrance of Azov to render him confident of mastering the Turks.

Not that it was in his nature to think and act other than prudently.

He had not begun this war for glory nor fought any battle for display, but always with the idea of some solid advantage, of taking some step towards the attainment of his final objective—the raising of Russia to a great place among the nations of the world.

The building of St. Petersburg and Kronstadt had

already shown his intention of making his empire not Eastern but Western, and he had now demonstrated that he had mastered the art of war sufficiently to defeat utterly the greatest captain of the age.

He was not unduly elated at this success which was so much more than he had dared to hope for.

At first he had thought the Poltava battle lost; he had been in the thick of the fight and twice a ball had pierced his hat; perhaps Karl himself was no more surprised than Peter at the final issue of the combat.

The Czar's manner of celebrating his victory was at once generous and savage.

He treated the Swedish generals with courtesy and consideration, drinking their health as "My masters in the art of war," but the Cossacks and Kalmucks were broken on the wheel and the Swedish soldiers sent as slaves to Siberia.

He would have liked to have taken Karl, not from pride, but because he wished to know personally so remarkable a man, and he wished to capture the old hetman of the Cossacks that he might impale him alive.

"I wonder Sweden tolerates such a villain near him," he exclaimed. "It must have been by his advice he came into the Ukraine."

He spoke to his two generals, Mentchikoff and Alexis Golowin, as he took his ease after dinner in the fortress of Poltava.

"Sweden is insane," said Mentchikoff calmly. "No man in his senses would have come so far from his base."

"Nor turned into the Ukraine without guides or provisions," added Golowin.

Peter made no reply; leaning against the frame of the open window he stared out into the sunny, dusty courtyard.

He was now thirty-six years of age and had lost all the bloom of youth; he was getting stout and his excesses had left their mark on his face, which, though still

soft and handsome, was lined and swollen and an unhealthy color.

The thick locks were tinged with gray and his eyebrows and lips twitched with incipient disease.

He was now unbuttoned because of the heat; his green coat was grease-stained, his linen soiled.

In his right hand, coarsened by manual labor, he held a glass full of some sweet liquid round which the flies buzzed.

A star of the purest brilliants hung by a common ribbon from one of his buttonholes, which gleamed as his breast rose and fell with his heavy breathing.

The two generals were magnificent in satin coats, perukes, stars, and laces, but neither had clean hands or linen.

The air was heavy with the odors of the sour, greasy Russian cooking and the smell of brandy.

The room was roughly and coarsely furnished, but a valuable ikon hung in one corner adorned with pigeon blood rubies and still garlanded with the wreaths of wax fruit from the Easter offerings.

Peter's thoughts were far away.

He was not dwelling on the personal advantages likely to accrue to him from this great victory, nor even on its military aspect; he was thinking that now at last he could secure his Baltic ports and gain for Russia that enormous trade once in the hands of, and so jealously guarded by, the Hansa League. The Russians, long treated as barbarians by the industrious and crafty Germans, had sold their goods to the great Hansa station at Novgorod always at a great loss, despite their persistent efforts to cheat, or bartered them for the English and Flemish cloths which could have been made in Russia.

Peter, who admired as much as he disliked the Germans, intended now that the Russian woods, metals, furs, wax, and honey should be traded direct with Europe.

He meant also to get the trade with Asia, and by

this intercommunication with nations to teach arts and crafts to his own people. While he drunk his kvas, regardless of the circling flies, and stared absently into the sunny courtyard, Golowin and Mentchiffok were discussing the present plight of Karl XII.

The fugitive King had gone to Bender in Bessarabia, and was being treated with generous courtesy by the Porte.

He was, however, for all the pomp that surrounded him, nothing but a prisoner, and it was doubtful if, even had he wished, he could have left Turkey.

"He will give no further trouble," remarked Prince Golowin.

But Mentchikoff was not of this opinion.

"A man of those lion-like qualities," he said, "is not so easily subdued."

"He may not be," replied the other shrewdly, "but without resources he can do nothing."

Peter turned his head and listened to this conversation.

"How many men has Sweden with him?" he asked, setting down his glass.

"They do not know, Peter Alexievitch," replied Mentchikoff, "but it cannot be many—only those fugitives who contrived to escape across the frontier."

"No one of importance?"

"Not beyond Poniatowski, Müllern, his chancellor, and a few officers—and the old Mazeppa," said Mentchikoff.

At the mention of the hetman of the Cossacks Peter's face twitched with fury.

"May the devil overtake that ancient traitor," he cried, "and roast him to all eternity!"

He did not care to dwell on the thought of the escape of this rebel, who had indeed behaved with ingratitude and falsity to the monarch who had so warmly befriended and protected him.

Without any more words he left the room and went

to the apartments of his wife, who accompanied him on all his campaigns.

He intended soon to marry her publicly and proclaim her as Czarina.

Not that Katherina had ever demanded this of him (indeed she had not expected him to marry her at all), but to please his own passion for this woman, who still continued to entirely please his curious fancy.

There were those who believed that if she had had a living child he could have disinherited Prince Alexis in favor of the offspring of Katherina, since the heir was not only the son of a disgraced and imprisoned mother, but showed already strong reactionary tendencies towards the barbaric customs Peter was so painfully eliminating from Russia.

Katherina was now clothed in Western fashion; a tight bodice and full skirt of blue silk, a pearl necklace, and her hair rolled into long curls.

She was now very stout, and her teeth were ruined through eating sweetmeats; her complexion was greasy, and her hands ill kept; she had acquired no air of dignity, but an expression of complete good nature showed still on her handsome features.

A Tartar maidservant with Asiatic features was seated on a scarlet cushion, singing as she worked a piece of orange and gold embroidery on a frame.

Peter spoke to neither but seated himself on the low covered chair beside his wife who knew better than to speak to him when he was silent.

The little maid, with an unchanged countenance, continued singing, in a low, melancholy, and monotonous voice, an old Tartar song:

The gentle baby died, mother, died when it was born.
He will never saddle horse, mother, nor eat the cakes of corn,
Or ride before his soldiers in the glory of the morn,
Nor chase the bitter tiger or the fleet and lovely fawn.
The gentle baby died, mother, died when he was born.

Peter stared at the singer, as if fascinated by her flat, brown face.

Katherina was not thinking of the song nor of him; it was very hot and she was almost asleep in her comfortable chair.

They wrapped him in a silken swaith and in a golden shawl,
And laid him 'mid the tulips, him the fairest of them all.
I saw him as a chieftain, magnificent and tall,
Riding red from combat or playing of the ball.
They wrapped him in a silken swaith and in a golden shawl.

And I am left so lonely, all in the twilight clear,
A-holding of my bosom where lay my tender dear,
A-watching of the tent door when the first stars appear,
Crying for my baby in the great desert near.
And I am left so lonely, all in the twilight clear.

Katherina glanced rather uneasily at the Czar; she had hoped that now he had achieved this great victory he would be less moody and melancholy.

Even her placid good-humor did not always find Peter easy to manage; sometimes her ease-loving temperament was inclined to regret the days of her comfortable prosperity with Prince Mentchikoff.

"The King of Sweden has not been captured?" she asked gently.

"Nay, he crossed the Bug and is safe in Turkey, flattered by the Sultan."

"Well, he will trouble you no more," said Katherina pleasantly.

The little Tartar maid rose and crept away, with a furtive look at the terrible Czar.

"I do not know," replied Peter. "He is a very able man. But I think I have secured the Baltic Provinces."

Leaning forward with a sudden eagerness he began discoursing of this Baltic Empire and what the acquisition of it would mean to Russia, what she could do when she commanded the town and gulf of Riga and all the islands, of the new naval base of Kronstadt, and the new arts and sciences already beginning to flourish in St. Petersburg.

As he spoke, his rough voice, suffused face, and swollen eyes became inspired; he forgot the ignorant woman to whom he spoke, and declaimed as if he was before a nation of men.

All that he said Katherina had heard before; she, who was not able to read or write, was not interested as to whether Esthonia, Livonia and Lithuania were in the hands of the Czar or not. As for his new city, she preferred Moscow to the new buildings that had risen on the marshes of the Neva.

It seemed to her a thing sufficiently tremendous to be Czar of Russia, and in her heart she wished that Peter would leave his ambitions and be content with the greatness he already had.

She was slightly disappointed that he was not satisfied with the great success he had just gained; she had hoped that when Karl was defeated Peter would enjoy the greatness and power he possessed in that peace and quiet and comfortable pomp that were her ideals of happiness.

Therefore a certain weariness came over her at hearing him once more expound the schemes she had never understood and now was tired of; even his project of making himself Emperor of All the Russias and her his Empress did not excite her; ease and tranquillity were what this lazy woman wanted, and she would sooner have been left in a secure obscurity than be dragged forward to a dubious and perhaps dangerous greatness.

Peter, talking vehemently and absorbed in these matters so near his heart, rose and began to walk up and down the room without noticing Katherina.

And she, half dozing, did not trouble to reply, but began to nod in her chair.

The Czar, suddenly turning to enforce some point, saw her heavy attitude and half-closed eyes; as he stared at her she yawned.

Peter instantly flamed into terrible wrath.

"Ah!" he cried. "You sleep while I talk, eh?"

She sat up at once, wide-awake and pale.

"I heard every word you said, Peter Alexievitch," she stammered.

"You lie," returned the Czar fiercely, "but what does it matter if you heard or no? It was all beyond your pitiful understanding."

Katherina began to whimper.

"I have always been faithful," she murmured, twisting her plump hands together.

Peter looked at her with contempt.

Anger would sometimes give him a clear-sighted vision of the creature who had so long infatuated him; he saw her now as a stupid peasant woman, and despised himself for the dominion she had over him.

His anger dropped to gloom.

"It is not your fault, but mine," he said, "for putting you where you are."

Katherina, grateful that his wrath had passed, dared not risk inflaming him by another word, but sat meekly pulling at the folds of her blue silk skirt.

Peter shrugged his shoulders and left her abruptly; his mood had been crossed and he had no wish for the company even of Mentchikoff, who was, like Katherina, a creature of his own creating, and accordingly sometimes despised by the Czar, who, despite his Western reforms, remained Eastern in his ideas of autocracy and his own almost divine power and privileges.

He went heavily downstairs, called for his horse and rode, alone, round the counterscarp of Poltava.

Karl would molest him no more—North Europe lay open to his armies; he could pull Stanislaus down as quickly as he had been set up, and put whatever puppet he chose on the throne of Poland.

He had accomplished his army, his navy, his port, his capital—and yet in his half-savage heart was still this brooding melancholy, this lingering dissatisfaction.

His own cruelties, his own excesses, seemed even to himself to mar his triumph.

The wife and the friend he had chosen dragged him

down and he knew it, yet he could have no more avoided them than the diseases that hampered his body and clouded his brain.

He reined up his beautiful black Arab on the ramparts and gazed across the plain where he had broken Karl XII.

And even at that moment he felt a half-wistful envy of the man whom he had vanquished—the man who could conquer himself.

PART III

EXILE

"Que craignez-vous encore? Dieu e moi nous sommes toujours vivants."—*Medal of Karl XII.*

CHAPTER I

NEARLY four years after the battle of Poltava on a cold clear day of early spring the Pasha, who was governor of the Turkish province of Bender, turned sadly away, followed by his suite, from three stone houses, strange in structure and design, that stood near the village of Varnitza, near the banks of the Dniester.

These houses had been recently built by the King of Sweden, whose camp in Bender had been threatened by floods.

One was occupied by the King himself, one by his friend Grothusen, and the third by his ministers, and these plain buildings looking so incongruous in the eastern landscape, had become an eyesore and a terror to the Porte.

Ever since Karl had flung himself on the mercy of the Turks, sooner than fall into the hands of Peter, intrigue and counter-intrigue had distracted the Ottoman government.

Count Poniatowski, able, subtle, and tireless, had used every art to persuade the Sultan to take up arms for the defeated King, and the Muscovites had done their best to check him at every turn.

Viziers had risen and fallen, plots had become com-

plicated and bitter, war had been declared on Russia, peace made, war declared again, then peace once more, and finally the Sultan had wearied of his guest, and every effort was made to induce Karl to return to his own country.

After long and involved negotiations Karl had consented to go if his expenses were paid; more than the sum asked for had been sent him thankfully by Ahmed II, but Karl, after receiving the money, had again refused to depart, alleging that he suspected a plot to deliver him into the hands of his enemies.

Even Eastern hospitality was now exhausted, and on Karl's cool demand for more money an order came from the Sultan that if he would not go willingly he was to be moved from Turkish territory by force.

It was this order that the Governor of Bender, grieved to his courteous soul by the turn of events, had just delivered to Karl, without making the least impression.

Four years of what was in truth but an honorable captivity, of idleness and exile, had by no means lowered the lofty spirit or softened the hard obstinacy of the King of Sweden. Through all the ramifications of the intrigues of which the Porte was the center, his one purpose had remained clear and unshaken.

He wanted an army to lead against Peter, and latterly he wanted the punishment of Mahomet Baltadgi, the vizier who had let the Czar escape with the easy terms of the Peace of Pruth.

While Ismail Pasha was galloping, a thing unusual in a Turk, away from Varnitza with the news of the King's obstinacy to the Khan of the Tartars who, conjointly with him, had received the Sultan's orders, he met M. Fabrice, the envoy of the Duke of Holstein, who had his residence with Karl, and reined up his sweating steed.

"What news, Ismail Pasha?" asked M. Fabrice anxiously.

The Turk's expression was mingled grief and in-

dignation; he knew that this affair might cost him his place and perhaps his life, since he had given the twelve hundred pieces to the Swedes trusting to their honor to depart.

"Your King will not listen to reason," he replied, "and we shall see strange things."

M. Fabrice rode on through the sunny afternoon and, by the time he reached the camp at Varnitza, found that the Governor was carrying out already the instructions brought him that day by the Sultan's grand equerry. The guard of janissaries that had attended Karl during his exile had been removed, the supply of provisions stopped, and all the followers of the King told that if they wished for food they must leave the Swedes and go to the town of Bender.

Consequently, M. Fabrice met a stream of Poles and Cossacks, hastening from the village of Varnitza, and the huts and tents they had raised round the King's house, to put themselves under the protection of the Porte.

The heart of M. Fabrice sank; long and weary had been the exile, bitter the hope deferred, the suspense, the waiting, fatiguing, the long idleness to those used to an active life, deadening this suspension of all part in the affairs of Europe, and he for one could not understand why Karl should have preferred to prolong such a life sooner than take his part in the politics of the world, nor how he could have so long permitted himself to be misled by the chimera of Turkish assistance.

Sadly he went to the King's house; the domestics were depressed, the Swedish soldiers eyed with gloomy contempt the departing crowd of Russians and Poles, as if they regretted the good food that these people, so worthless in the hour of need, had for so long consumed.

The King had just risen from the table, and it was in his ante-chamber that M. Fabrice found him.

Poniatowski was still at Constantinople, endeavoring to serve Karl by his endless intrigues among the

ministers and favorites of the Sultan, but the rest of Karl's few faithful friends were with him, as if they all took counsel together.

There was M. Grothusen and the Baron Görtz who between them had taken the place of Count Piper, now miserably dead in Russia, General Hord, and General Dahldorf, and Colonel Gierta, who had saved Karl's life at Poltava, and several other officers and ministers together with the King's chaplain, and another Lutheran priest.

The house, contrary to the King's tastes, was furnished magnificently, to impress the Turks who were not apt to respect a monarch entirely without pomp, and this room was richly hung with silken tapestry, covered with Persian carpets, and filled with Eastern and European furniture of costly material and pattern.

All of this had been bought out of the Turkish bounty, which had been generously lavished on Karl until these disputes about his departure arose, and only lately withdrawn; Karl was now subsisting on borrowing the money his reckless munificence had enriched his friends with, and raising loans at 50 per cent from Jew and English bankers in Constantinople.

Karl was seated in an ebony chair with sapphire-blue velvet cushions; his own dress was unchanged; he was booted, spurred, wore a black taffeta cravat, and no peruke but his own hair, now close-cropped and scanty on the forehead.

He had never altered the stern austerity of his life, nor his rigorous exercises, and was in perfect health and superb strength.

He was now thirty-two years of age, and his noble face, unlined, and fresh and clear in color, still had the look of extreme youth; his figure was heavier but yet active and graceful, he had hardly reached the flower of his strength, and began to show the magnificent proportions of a Viking, deep-chested, long-limbed,

strong, without being coarse, and powerful, without being clumsy.

Adversity had given him neither a sense of humor, gentleness, nor gaiety, yet in some way he was more attractive than he had been, and the uncomplaining fortitude with which he had endured his cruel fortune inspired a noble pity in the hearts of brave men.

Not by a hair-breadth had he deviated from the code of pride, of honor, and endurance that he had followed when North Europe trembled at his feet, nor in any way faltered from the serenity that had been his when his conquests had dazzled mankind.

Nor was his obstinacy, a less admirable virtue, in any way abated, as his present attitude showed.

M. Fabrice found that the generals and ministers were engaged in persuading the King to abandon the design of opposing to the utmost the wishes of the Sultan.

Karl's blue eyes, that had more fire than formerly, glanced at once at the new-comer.

"Ah, M. Fabrice," he said, "have you come to join your prayers to those of these gentlemen who want me to run away?"

The envoy from Holstein did not know what to say; despite what he had heard from Ismail Pasha, and his knowledge of the character of Karl, he could hardly believe that the King meant to make an armed resistance with 300 men against 26,000, which was the number of the Tartars and Turks in Bender.

"God knows," broke out Councilor Müllern, with tears in his eyes. "Your Majesty does not need to prove your courage to the world, and it would be a nobler part to submit."

"Submit! submit!" repeated the King angrily. "You tire me with words!"

General Hord, who had fought by Karl's side at Poltava, and who was still maimed as a result of his wounds, now addressed the King.

"Sire," he asked, "will you condemn to a miserable

death, at the hands of the infidel, these poor Swedes, the remnant of your victories?"

"I know, by those victories, that you know how to obey," replied the King sternly. "Till now you have done your duty, General Hord—continue to do it to-day."

M. Fabrice now found his voice.

"Sire," he said, "I was with the Khan, and on leaving him met Ismail Pasha; from what I learnt it is but too true that they have received orders from the Porte that every Swede who resists is to be slain, even to your Majesty!"

"Have you seen this order?" demanded the King quietly.

"Yes," replied M. Fabrice, "the Khan showed it to me."

"Well," said Karl, "tell them from me that I give another order—and that is that no Swede leaves Bender."

M. Fabrice was in despair; he glanced at the sad faces of Karl's faithful friends who had suffered such pains and hardships for him, and he felt it was unendurable that all should end in a useless death.

He fell on his knees, grasping the skirts of the King's coat.

"For the sake of these others, sire, who are all that are left to you, out of so many who have perished for your sake——"

"Get up, M. Fabrice," said Karl kindly, "and return to your lodging. There is no need for you to remain to share my fortune."

M. Fabrice sprang to his feet, angry and agitated.

"This obstinacy is not worthy, sire. You have no right to fling away so many lives for a whim!"

Karl only smiled; he was not easily angry with M. Fabrice.

Holstein-Gottorp had always been specially under his protection, nor had he ever forgotten the young Duke for whose sake he had first gone to war and who had been killed at his side.

It was his nature to be most tenaciously faithful to any cause or friendship he had once undertaken, and he had never faltered in his resolve to uphold the rights of his brother-in-law; he intended to make the little orphan Duke, his elder sister's son, his heir, and to that end kept M. Fabrice near him, and gave him as much of his confidence as he accorded to any man.

Therefore he endured calmly the reproaches, the anger, and the pleadings of the excited envoy who was listened to with approval by the others, yet they, who had tried the like arguments in vain, had little hope from the eloquence of M. Fabrice.

All, as the listeners had foreseen, was useless.

"Return to your Turks," smiled the King. "If they attack me, I shall know how to defend myself."

M. Fabrice had not the heart to reply, and in the little silence that followed the King's speech, Jeffreys, the English minister, entered the chamber.

He advanced and kissed the King's hand with the air of one bringing good news; he also had been trying his good offices with the Khan, and had obtained this favor—that an express should be sent to Adrianople, where the Sultan then was, to demand if in reality extreme measures were to be taken against the King of Sweden, and in the meanwhile permission to allow provisions to be sent to the King.

Karl received this very coldly.

"You are a voluntary mediator, sir," he said. "I ask for no favor at the hands of the Sultan."

"Nor did I, sire," replied the Englishman. "But it is possible that the Porte may repent of the delayed severity of these orders, and in any case this gives your Majesty time to leave with dignity."

"M. Jeffreys," remarked the King, with freezing coldness, "as you leave my house you will see my entrenchments."

"Can it be possible——" began the minister.

"Sir," interrupted the King, "more things are possible than you may dream of. I do not want your

mediation. Nor do I want the provisions of the Turks. What I need I can pay for."

The Englishman, who, in common with every man present, had lent the King money and knew the difficulty Poniatowski had in raising forced loans in Constantinople, thought this pride as ill-timed as the King's obstinacy, but he knew that it was in keeping with Karl's character, and that he did not speak out of flaunting vanity but from that superb disregard of money that he had always possessed; gold and human life, worldly dignities, and common prudence had alike been always too utterly disregarded by the King of Sweden.

"I will mingle no more in the affairs of a monarch so inflexible," said the Englishman, with a slight smile, as he prepared to retire.

"A wise resolution, M. Jeffreys," replied the King gravely.

The clergy now essayed to attempt what ministers and soldiers had alike failed to effect.

Karl's chaplain, coming forward, addressed him in stern tones.

"Has your Majesty considered how long and generously these Turks have succored you? What Christianity is it that so rudely returns such generosity? Have you considered your poor subjects who yet hope, after these weary years of wandering and of exile, to see their homes?"

In this the chaplain was seconded by some other pastors who threw themselves on their knees before the King.

Karl started to his feet; though the discipline of the Lutheran religion was peculiarly suited to his temperament, and the observance of its rules had always been a factor in his success, still there was little of the fanatic in him, and his long sojourn in Turkey had induced a considerable indifference towards Christianity in the heart of one who had always admired pagan virtues and pagan heroes.

He therefore viewed with real anger the interference of these pastors whose appearance at the conference he had hitherto hardly noticed.

His face flushed, and his blue eyes darkened ominously.

On the heads of the clergy broke all the anger the other remonstrants had failed to provoke.

"I keep you," he said, with cutting anger, "to say prayers, and not to give me advice."

With that and a general glance of contempt for the entire company he left the chamber, and the only man who dared follow him was Baron Görtz, a man of a spirit akin to his own.

"I wish Poniatowski was here—he might do something," remarked Grothusen despondently.

"Not an angel of God could do anything," said the chaplain, who, in common with the other clergy, found himself in the ridiculous position of rising from his knees in front of an empty chair.

"He will be massacred!" cried General Hord in despair.

"We shall all be massacred," said Müllern. "How long do you think 300 men will resist 26,000?"

"I know," put in Colonel Gierta, "that the King will suffer the roof to be pulled over his head sooner than surrender."

"The Sultan may grant a respite," suggested M. Fabrice.

But Grothusen shook his head.

"His patience has been too greatly tried—and the vizier dare not risk our presence here long."

"But Poniatowski may do something," urged Müllern, who had much confidence in the tireless and resourceful Pole.

The words had hardly left his lips before several shots rang out, and all started to their feet, thinking this the signal for an attack on the house.

But immediately after, Neumann, the King's surgeon, entered.

"The King is having all the Arab chargers given him by the Sultan shot," he announced. "and the carcasses flung to the Tartar troops."

The Swedes were silent.

In their hearts they knew there was no excuse for Karl's behavior, and that reason, right, and justice were all on the side of the Sultan, who had from the first been forbearing, chivalrous, and generous to a stranger whom he neither liked nor understood, and who had been the cause of much annoyance to him and of many distractions in his court. Yet they all loved Karl, who till the days of his exile had awakened little affection in any heart, and who now exhibited few lovable qualities.

But his unyielding determination, his iron inflexibility, his austere life, his high ideals of heroic virtues had inspired a feeling that was almost reverence in the hearts of those who had shared his dreary exile.

And in this bitter pass to which his obstinacy had brought them it was not of themselves they thought, but of the King—it was his peril, not their own, that forced the tears to their eyes.

CHAPTER II

THE answer from Adrianople was to the effect that the Swedes were to leave Bender at all costs and that all who resisted were to be forcibly ejected, and, if need be, slain.

Their commands were not at all to the liking of the Khan or Ismail Pasha, both of whom had come to like Karl, a type admirable in the eyes of a Mussulman, and M. Fabrice again tried his talents as mediator.

All these efforts, like so many others, proved fruitless, and for the same reason—the inflexibility of Karl.

Even Baron Görtz thought the King went too far, and he knew, better than any man, the real cause of Karl's bitter obstinacy.

And this was the treaty of Pruth.

When, after years of dreary waiting, the endless intrigues of Poniatowski had at last succeeded in causing the Porte to declare war on Russia, Karl had believed that his patience was rewarded and that his downfall would be avenged.

And it seemed as if fortune was again favoring him; Peter, marching into Turkey as recklessly as Karl had marched into the Ukraine, found himself on the banks of the Pruth, isolated, outnumbered, without provisions or stores, in a position as desperate as that in which Karl had found himself at Poltava.

So terrible was the prospect, so certain seemed defeat, slavery, the triumph of his defeated rival, and the failure of his own life's work, that the Czar fell into a state of despair which brought on a fearful attack of convulsions.

While he was thus helpless a council of war was called at which Katherina presided.

By the advice of this ignorant but astute woman, now roused from her usual placidity, all the available treasure in the camp was gathered together and sent as a present to the Grand Vizier in command of the Turkish army, together with a demand to know his terms of peace.

The result of this was the treaty of Pruth or Ialciu, by which Peter ceded all the advantages he had gained in his previous war with Turkey, including the town of Azov, and agreed to withdraw his troops from Poland and to renew the tribute to the Tartars that he had long ceased to pay. In return he was allowed to retire with his army, cannon, flags, and baggage, furnished with food by the Turks, and Karl, hastening to the battle and hoping to find the Czar as he had been himself before Poltava, found that the Russians had retreated untouched.

Nor had Poniatowski, who was with the vizier, been able to obtain a single advantage for his master in the signing of the peace, beyond an article by which Peter engaged not to trouble the return of Karl to his dominions, should he choose to come through Russia.

Karl, who had ridden fifty leagues from Bender, swum the Pruth at the risk of his life, and dashed through the Muscovite encampment, had been driven beyond his usual control at the news which he received on entering Poniatowski's tent.

In a cold fury he went to face the vizier, but received no satisfaction from the calm Turk, who, having as he believed secured his master's interests, cared little for the rage of the fugitive King of Sweden.

"I have the right," he said, "to make war and peace."

"But you had the whole Russian army in your power!" cried Karl.

"Our law," replied Mahomet Baltadgi, "tells us to give peace to our enemies when they demand our mercy."

"And does it order," retorted Karl, "that you make

bad treaties when you might make good ones? Do you not know that you could have led the Czar prisoner to Constantinople?"

The vizier replied gravely and dryly in words that Karl never forgot.

"We cannot shelter all the Kings of Europe in Turkey."

The King, turning with disdainful haste, caught his spur in the Turk's long robe, purposely tore it with an angry movement of his foot, and galloped back to Bender, blacker despair in his heart than there had been after Poltava.

He then resolved that he would not leave Turkey until he had secured the punishment of Mahomet Baltadgi and another army with which to march against Peter.

The vizier took care that his complaints and protests should not reach the Sultan; all letters from Bender were intercepted on the road, but after a while Karl's hopes were flattered by the Porte which became indignant at the behavior of the Czar. The Keys of Azof did not arrive, the tribute was not paid, and Poniatowski was able to convey to the Sultan the news that Muscovite troops were still in Poland.

Peter, however, had soon accommodated matters with the Porte, and Mahomet Baltadgi was more resolute than ever in insisting on the removal of the man whom he now knew to be his enemy.

He obtained from Vienna a safe-conduct for Karl if he chose to return through the territories of the Empire, and he put galleys at his disposal if he wished to go by sea.

But Karl, bitter and humiliated, had been from the first resolute not to be chased from Turkey, but to leave at his own convenience.

He had been confirmed in this attitude by the discovery of a correspondence between the Khan of the Tartars and General Fleming, the minister of Augustus of Saxony, in the ambiguous phrasing of which he and

Baron Görtz had thought they had discovered a design to deliver Karl to the Saxons on his return.

M. Fabrice had satisfied himself that the Khan spoke the truth when he denied these allegations, but Karl was not to be convinced.

The express having arrived from Adrianople, the predictions of M. Fabrice and the English minister having failed, and Karl being still inflexible, there remained now but to expect an assault of the Tartars and janissaries.

The King had already entrenched his 300 troops and disposed his household for the defense of his house.

Müllern, with Karl's secretary, the clergy and the other ministers were to defend the chancellor's house; Baron Fieff was to command the little garrison of cooks and servants and grooms in the house of Grothusen.

The King assigned to every one his post, and promised rewards to those who should conduct themselves bravely.

The Turks came to the attack with ten pieces of cannon, but Grothusen rode out to meet them, unarmed and bareheaded, and appealed to these janissaries, who had so often enjoyed Swedish bounty, to desist from this attack on helpless and brave men, and to grant a delay of three days in which to ascertain if in reality the orders of the Sultan were so severe.

These words produced a revolt among the janissaries, who swore to accord the three days to the King, and rushed in a tumult to the Pasha of Bender, declaring that the orders of the Sultan were forged.

Despite the protests of the Khan, Ismail Pasha postponed the assault till the next day, and drawing aside sixty of the oldest janissaries showed them the positive order of the Sultan, at the same time telling them to go peaceably to Karl and request his departure, offering themselves as his escort; so anxious was Ismail Pasha to avoid hurting Karl or any of his suite.

While these veterans were proceeding, armed only

with the white wands they bore in times of peace, to the King's camp, M. Fabrice, who could not now come to see the King in his state of siege, sent him a letter by the hands of a Turk, enclosing one from Poniatowski, then at Constantinople.

Baron Görtz took this dispatch to the King who was then (it was an early hour of the morning) alone in his chamber.

A great sadness filled the heart of this faithful friend as he looked at the King.

Karl, despite his strength and pride and obstinacy, was in a piteous position.

There was something heartrending, almost ridiculous in the King's attitude; this useless heroism, this futile defiance—all that had been splendid at Poltava was pitiful at Bender.

And all the more so because Karl saw neither the pathos nor the tragedy of his situation, and disposed his cooks and grooms, his pastors and clerks, with as much gravity as he had disposed his veteran troops before Varsovia or Klissow.

Yet he was more moved than Grothusen had ever seen him, save in the Turkish camp at Pruth. Something of the old Viking fury that could only be satisfied by an orgy of blood was upon him, apart from his real conviction that it would be dishonor to depart peaceably; he lusted to fight.

A warrior by birth, inclination, and training, these four years of idleness had been almost unendurable to his fierce spirit.

He longed to draw his sword once more and feel that atmosphere of excitement and peril that was the breath of life to him.

Added to this he was deeply angry with the Turks; no one could tell the bitterness of his disappointment in having failed to achieve a Turkish army to lead against Peter.

And the news from Europe could hardly have been worse; all his enemies had attacked his estates during

his absence, Augustus was once more King of Poland, and Russia occupied the place Sweden had so lately held as Arbiter of the North.

All these reflections weighed on Grothusen as he addressed the King.

"Sire, there is a party of janissaries on their way to your Majesty, and I beseech you to listen to them."

Karl looked up as if he had been startled from a reverie.

Without replying he took the letter from M. Fabrice, broke the seal, and read the enclosure from Count Poniatowski.

The intrepid Pole had fallen into disfavor with the Sultan after Karl's imprudent demand for more money and was not permitted to be with the Court, then at Adrianople; he had, however, managed to keep in touch with affairs, and he now wrote to inform the King that it was but too true that Ahmed had ordered the Khan to proceed to extremity if Karl refused to move from Bender.

In impassioned words of love and respect Poniatowski implored the King to relinquish his mad design of resistance, to think no more of assistance from Turkey, and to return to his own country, trusting to his own genius to retrieve his fortunes.

The King put down the letter and rose.

"All, all so ready to persuade me to my own dishonor!" he exclaimed.

He was deeply moved, and his eyes showed dark in a pale face as he flung back his head and stared at Grothusen.

"On my soul," cried that nobleman, "these Turks mean no dishonor."

"Have you not yourself seen," returned Karl, "the letters to the Khan from Count Fleming? I believe they mean to sell me to Augustus."

"I am sure, sire," replied Grothusen, with some heat, "they do not. I know truth when I see it, and I am

convinced that the Khan and Ismail Pasha are acting as honorable men."

"Very well, then," said Karl, "I also will act as an honorable man. I refuse to be forced to do what I would not do willingly."

"You know that this may mean your life, sire, which is sacred to your people? That all your friends, servants, and guards, so long faithful to you, and looking to you for protection, will be either massacred or taken into slavery?"

"Grothusen," replied the King coldly, "if you fear to share my fortunes, join the Poles and Cossacks who have gone to Bender."

At this cruel remark the Swede flushed hotly all over his fair face.

"That you are beyond reason, sire, does not mean that I am beyond loyalty."

"No," replied the King more gently, "I have no doubt as to your loyalty—nor as to that of any with me."

"The generals are in despair, sire."

"They have rusted too long—like my sword," remarked the King briefly. "Have you any other news, Grothusen?"

He spoke as if he would dismiss the subject of their present position, and Grothusen endeavored to follow his humor, though indeed there was no subject on which he could speak that would be particularly pleasing to either.

"M. Müllern had an express this morning to say that King Stanislaus was still on his way to the Turkish frontier."

"He is my friend," replied Karl. "Were he not I should call him weak and foolish."

In truth, the inflexibility of the King of Sweden had for some time been forced by the pliability of the man whom he had made King of Poland.

Stanislaus, faithful as Karl to an ancient friendship, had, on being driven from the Polish throne, gone to Pomerania to defend the dominions of his benefactor.

After many vicissitudes he had resolved to abandon the crown that was the real cause of contention between Karl and his enemies, and by admitting the claim of Augustus to pave the way for a peace for Sweden.

To this end he had written to Karl several times begging him to leave him in retirement, and not for his already lost cause to risk blood, treasure, or his own advantages.

In acting thus the generous Pole showed that he did not know the man with whom he dealt; Karl was merely angry at this self-sacrifice; he was haughtily decided never to permit Augustus to keep the throne of Poland, and equally to never permit Stanislaus to resign it; he had never, in the dreariest, most hopeless hours of his exile relinquished the dream of unthroning the Czar, and the chivalrous withdrawal of Stanislaus Leczinski from the combat merely irritated the indomitable Swede.

Learning his humor, but still convinced of the wisdom of his own decision, Stanislaus had decided to come himself to Bender to inform Karl of the state of Europe and the desirability of his resigning the crown of Poland.

It was this journey, that the Pole was making incognito, that Grothusen now referred to.

It was not a happy change of subject, for it vexed Karl almost as much as that of the deputation of the janissaries.

"He too comes to dissuade me from what I have already set my mind on," remarked the angry King. "Well, let him come. If I meet him, I shall tell him that if he will not be King of Poland, I can find another who will."

He walked up and down the room, slowly and in a controlled manner, but the heaving of his bosom, the pallor of his face, and the dark flash in the eyes usually so cold, told that he was angry in no common fashion.

He suddenly stopped before his friend.

"And you, Grothusen!" he exclaimed, "you too would

wish to see me a laughing-stock for the Czar—turned from this country at his pleasure.”

His emotion overpowered him as he mentioned his chief enemy; he turned to the window and leant his sick head against the mullions.

Peter Alexievitch!

That name was the cause of all his wrath and soreness, all his stubborn pride and deep fury; the Czar, the only man who had been worthy of his steel—the man who had defeated him—the man, who, through what Karl considered the baseness of Mahomet Baltadgi, had escaped vengeance on the banks of the Pruth.

In many bitter ways had Peter made Karl feel the sting of defeat.

Piper, Rehnsköld, Wurtemberg, and other ministers and generals, famous and glorious for their part in Karl's great victories, his close companions for ten years, had marched in chains, two by two, through the streets of St. Petersburg, following the barbaric triumph with which the Czar impressed his people.

And the Muscovite ambassadors at Constantinople had flourished with Swedish slaves, the heroes of Klissow and Poltava, in their train.

And Karl had the humiliation of knowing that the rest of his veterans, the flower of the army, were working as slaves in Siberia or teaching their masters their native handicrafts.

Every way Peter was prosperous; his navy rode the waters of the gulf of Riga and the gulf of Finland; his armies spread all over the Baltic Provinces, and held Poland at their mercy; his ambassadors were received at every Court; the arts and sciences grew apace in Russia.

It was no wonder that his name inspired with despair the proud young warrior who had thought to dethrone him in a year.

“Do you think,” he suddenly asked aloud, “that I shall leave Turkey till I secure the punishment of Mahomet Baltadgi?”

He now hated this man, who had snatched his patiently waited-for vengeance from him, almost as much as he hated Peter Alexievitch.

"Count Poniatowski does his best——" began Grothusen.

"Cease to weary me with that useless talk," interrupted Karl fiercely.

Grothusen looked mournfully at the strong noble face; he felt an overwhelming pity for this life that was so strong and brave and steadfast, and so lonely and so thwarted, for this nature that had greatly dared, greatly achieved, and then had to endure the humiliation of complete failure.

Karl was not lovable, but in that moment his friend yearned over him as if he had been a woman.

Before either could speak again Baron Görtz entered.

The sixty janissaries, white-bearded veterans, unarmed and on foot, had arrived.

They sent the most humble, most respectful message to the King.

If he would only leave Bender they would themselves escort him anywhere he wished, even to Adrianople, so that he might put his case to the Sultan.

"I will not see them," said the King.

"Sire, I fear they will never leave until you have spoken with them," replied Görtz.

The King gave a deep sigh and rang the bell; Frederic the valet, who had held him on his horse at Poltava, appeared.

"Go to these old Turks," commanded Karl, "and bid them leave my house, or else," he sought for the worst insult one could give a Mohammedan, "I will send my soldiers to cut off their beards."

CHAPTER III

THE janissaries, utterly outraged at this insult, retired muttering in anger: "Ah, head of iron, head of iron, if you will perish, you shall!"

The Turks and Tartars were now again advancing to the attack.

Karl ran out, mounted and galloped, in company with three generals, towards his little camp. He was in time to see the 300 Swedes surrounded and overwhelmed by the Turks to whom they surrendered without firing a shot.

When the King beheld his veterans thus delivering themselves into the hands of the enemy, in his very presence, the deep color sprang into his cheeks.

For an instant he covered his face with his hands, then, throwing back his head haughtily, he spoke to the officers who accompanied him.

"Come, let us defend the house, then," he said, and turned swiftly about, and followed by the generals gained his residence that he had left garrisoned by forty servants and fortified as best he could.

These defenses, however, had been useless before the onslaught of an army; the Turks had stormed the house and entered by the windows, a surging crowd of janissaries heaved before the door.

The King's servants had retired into the large dining-hall that opened off the entrance chamber on the ground floor, their fair frightened faces could be seen at the great window, in strange contrast to the dark triumphant faces shouting without.

The King leant forward from the saddle; his look was as intent as that of an eagle bending from a rock to drop on its prey. He glanced forward at his beleaguered house then back at those about him.

His following numbered in all twenty persons, including the generals Hord, Dahldorf, and Sparre, M. Fabrice who had contrived to join the King, and Frederic his valet.

"Stand by me now," cried the King, "and we will gain the house."

Mad as they thought his action, there was not one of them who would not have been ashamed to draw back now.

Flinging himself from his horse, grasping in one hand his sword and in the other a pistol, Karl threw himself on the crowd of janissaries who surged before his door, and began to cut his way through the press.

The Turks hurled themselves on him; Ismail Pasha had promised eight golden ducats to each man who could only touch the habit of the terrible king, if he was captured, and the janissaries fought and struggled to get near the tall figure in the blue uniform.

Karl laughed; the fury and the joy of battle, doubly grateful after years of enforced idleness, filled his veins; he cut down all those who stood in his way and, a head and shoulders above the crowd, forced through to the door.

A Turk placed a musket at his head, Karl turned and ran him through the chest; the musket went off, the ball grazed the King's nose, wounded his ear, and broke the arm of General Hord.

The Turks began to fall back before this man who appeared invincible and even superhuman; his long sword dripping blood, his pistol hot and smoking, his fair face calm yet lit with that cold fury of the North, so strange a thing to Eastern people, Karl of Sweden smote to right and left until he had cut his way to his doorstep.

The little garrison, who had been watching the

desperate fight with breathless agitation, threw open the door.

The King strode in, followed by his escort; the door was instantly bolted and barricaded with chairs, tables, and other articles of furniture. Karl now found himself in the large dining-hall; his entire retinue consisted of sixty men, of whom several were wounded, General Hord severely so.

The King's own face was all bloody from the gash in his ear; he wiped this away with a gesture of impatience and tossed down the soaked handkerchief.

The little company looked at him, no one saying anything; all were standing save the wounded general, who was seated while a valet tied up his arm with rough splinters and bandages. They all of them counted on certain death, and had only the melancholy satisfaction of resolving to sell their lives dear.

Only one or two intrepid spirits shared the King's humor, and were indifferent to the issue of the fray as long as they might acquit themselves with honor.

Among these was Baron Görtz, a daring, audacious, and courageous man full of nerve and resource, Grothusen, a calm, bold spirit, and Frederic, the faithful and intrepid valet.

For a moment the King stood silent, leaning on his bare sword, and listening to the Turks who had overrun the rest of the house and were hurrying from room to room, pillaging and searching for the King.

Shouts and heavy steps told that they had entered the adjoining apartment which was the King's bed-chamber.

Karl wiped his sword on the blue damask cover of a chair and picked up his musket and loaded it.

"Come," he said, "help me to turn these barbarians from my house."

So saying he flung open the inner door that led to the bed-chamber and strode in among the Turks, raising his musket as he did so and firing into the

group of plunderers. These, startled at the sudden apparition of the man whom they had believed dead or captured, and loaded with booty, were taken at a disadvantage.

The magnificent figure with the calm face now so fierce in expression, that they had been used to respect, filled them with awe; they retreated before Karl, dropping the gold and silver vessels, the rolls of tapestries, the knives and firearms that they had despoiled from the King's stores.

Karl advanced among them, throwing away his musket; he drew his sword and drove the Turks backwards before him; many jumped out of the window, two crawled under the brocade valences of the King's bed.

Karl, perceiving this, ran his sword through one; the other crawled out, and bending low before the King besought his mercy.

Karl turned to Grothusen, now close behind him.

"Tell him," he said, "that I will give him his life if he tells Ismail Pasha what he has seen."

Grothusen translated this; the shivering Turk eagerly promised, and was suffered to jump out of the window after his companions.

The invaders had now taken refuge in the cellars; from these Karl and his now heartened followers soon dislodged them; some were killed, others contrived their escape through doors or windows.

Karl ordered the dead to be flung out after the living, and in a short space of time the house was free of the enemy.

The Swedes now proceeded to barricade doors and windows, and to fetch such arms as were available.

A large store of muskets and powder had not been discovered by the Turks, and these proved ample for the arming of the garrison.

Karl, as composed and cool as always when in the midst of battle, was nevertheless animated by a furious anger and passion; his blood was up, and he was

utterly reckless of all consequences both to himself and others.

"We will make this house famous," he said, when he had given instructions to his men to resist to the very utmost and the very last.

"But too famous!" General Dahldorf could not help saying, "if it is to be the scene of your Majesty's——"

He could not say the word, and the tears rose to his eyes.

"My death," finished the King. "Well, if these are our last hours it is the more needful that we should make them honorable."

He posted such as he had of guards and soldiers and the more skilled of the servants at the windows, with orders to fire on the swarms of Turks and Tartars pressing about the house.

The Khan and Ismail Pasha now brought their cannon into action, but with no avail; the balls fell harmlessly from the stoutly built stone walls.

In a few moments the Swedes firing from the windows had killed over 200 Turks and wounded a great many others.

"See you," cried the King to Grothusen, "if my soldiers had stood firm we had defeated all these infidels!"

"Ah, sire," replied Grothusen, "had every man a spirit such as yours we should be invincible!"

It was no mere flattery he spoke, he meant and believed what he said.

And in his heart he thought—"If you had not been sick we had fought and died like this on the banks of the Dnieper, and not lived to see this exile."

The King was at one of the barricaded windows, firing over the heads of his crouching soldiers who were picking off the Turks who seemed in a certain confusion, when Baron Görtz gave a sudden cry and a deep curse.

He had perceived that the Turks, ashamed at being so long kept at bay by a handful of men, were sending

arrows, twisted with flaming straw, on to the roof, the doors, window-frames, and all the inflammable portions of the building. The exclamation had hardly left his lips before a great gush of flame invaded the room where the King was.

The roof, burning with a hundred flaming arrows, was falling into this upper chamber.

Karl, without a change of countenance, called two guards to help him find water.

General Dahldorf dragged along a small barrel from the stores.

With his own hands the King staved it in and hurled the contents on to the advancing flames; with a roar the fire increased so that all had to hurl themselves against the door; the perukes of the officers were singed, and arid smoke filled the eyes of all.

The barrel had been filled, not, as was thought, with water, but with brandy.

There was nothing to do but to retire into the next apartment; this was already menaced and full of smoke.

The roof was blazing, and flames began to creep round the walls.

The Turks, now passive, waited, with a kind of awe, for the Swedes to leave the doomed building; they had ceased their cries and shouts, and their excited faces were all turned towards the flaming house.

The King's position was indeed becoming untenable; driven from room to room by the darting flames the Swedes were forced to take refuge on the ground floor.

Even this was invaded by smoke and large sparks from the burning woodwork.

The fumes were becoming blinding, choking. They could hardly see each other's faces; only the King, Görtz, and Grothusen continued to fire from the flaming window.

A soldier, with singed clothes and hair, staggered up to the King and cried out, with his arm flung up to protect his eyes; that they must surrender.

"Surrender!" cried the King, looking over his shoulder. "Who dared say that word?"

"Sire," answered the wretched guard, "we shall burn alive!"

"Here is a strange man," said Karl contemptuously, "who thinks it is better to surrender than to die!"

Another soldier, who was near the King now, ventured to speak.

"Sire, could we not gain M. Müllern's house that is not fifty paces away, and that has a stone roof that is fireproof?"

The King's straight gaze was turned for an instant on the speaker; then his blue eyes flashed with joy.

He flung away his smoking musket and seized the soldier by the arm; he remembered the fellow's name, for he was among his personal guard.

"You are a true Swede, *Colonel Posen!*" he said.

The man crimsoned, even in this moment, with delight at this promotion, but Karl left him no time for thanks.

The flames were now enveloping them, and there was no time to be lost in forcing a way out of the burning house.

Putting himself at the head of his men, Karl issued from the door least damaged by the fire and emptied his pistol into the crowd of expectant and waiting Turks.

This example was followed by the officers and soldiers immediately behind, and so terrible was this onslaught of the desperate Swedes that the Turks recoiled, calling on "Allah! Allah!" to defend them from this dreadful hero.

But the little band had not gone far before they were overpowered; Karl, forced forward ahead of the others, was separated from them and entirely surrounded.

He threw away his pistol, and passing his sword from his left hand to his right, defended himself with that against the janissaries who pressed upon him with shouts of triumph.

For several moments he held his own against his enemies; several reeled back dead before him. He was hatless, and his fair, flushed face, the blue eyes vivid, showed above them all; then one caught him by the belt and dragged him half down; but he resisted to the full of his great strength and would have got free, but, in turning, his spur caught in the robe of one of his assailants and threw him.

They had him down, and twenty janissaries threw themselves on him to pin him to the earth.

Karl, with one last effort and a loud cry, flung his sword up into the air.

The bloody blade glittered a second in the pale spring sunshine, then was caught by a dozen eager hands.

The King, knowing now that all was useless, remained perfectly motionless.

The janissaries, whose cries of anger and triumph were mingled with exclamations of respect, lifted their terrible captive from the ground, and carrying him by the knees, the feet, and the shoulders, bore him to Ismail Pasha's tent. At the door of this they set him on his feet, and conducted him into the presence of the Governor of Bender.

Karl made no resistance; he looked at his captors with a little smile and passed into the tent.

It was the first time in his life that he had been without a sword.

Ismail Pasha, cool and grave, richly dressed and splendid in his luxurious tent, rose and courteously greeted his presence, asking him with many compliments to be seated on the silk-covered divan.

"I bless the All Highest," he said, "that your Majesty is alive—it was my despair that your Majesty compelled me to put in execution the orders of the Sultan."

Karl remained standing, a soiled, bloodstained figure, his clothes scorched and rent, his face blackened, his eyebrows and hair singed, but erect and haughty.

He disdained to notice the Turk's civilities.

"Had my 300 Swedes stood firm," was all he would say, "I had fought you for ten days, not ten hours."

"Alas!" said Ismail Pasha gravely, "here is misdirected courage!"

He turned aside to speak to the Khan of the Tartars who was present, and the interpreter, with much respect, informed Karl that he would be reconducted to Bender.

Karl smiled bitterly.

He would sooner have died than have been in his present position, but he gave no outward sign of discomposure; he wanted to know what had become of his servants and friends, but was too proud to ask.

It seemed that he had lost everything; his Swedes either killed or captured, his house burnt, his furniture, papers—everything, even to his wearing apparel, pillaged or destroyed.

And he knew of no one to whom he could turn in this extremity to which his obstinate pride had reduced him; he was now the prisoner of the Turks, and for all he knew might end his life a captive in exile.

He was mounted on a richly appointed horse, and conducted to Ismail Pasha's house in Bender. On the way he had the anguish of seeing his Swedish officers, chained two and two together, following, half nude, the Turks or Tartars who had captured them.

Karl started, and for the first time since he was a child, his cold blue eyes were wet with tears.

CHAPTER IV

NEXT morning M. Fabrice obtained permission to see the King.

He found him closely guarded by the janissaries who had captured him, in an apartment of Ismail Pasha's palace at Bender.

Karl was as the fight had left him; he had slept in his coat and top-boots, to the great amazement of the Turks, and received M. Fabrice seated on a divan covered with costly cushions, in his torn and burnt uniform, his person all stained with blood and powder.

He looked at M. Fabrice with his extraordinary straight and expressionless gaze; his eyes were slightly bloodshot, his cheeks unshaven, his fair hair disheveled, but his demeanor was calm and even gentle; there was nothing of yesterday's Viking fury.

He raised M. Fabrice, who had gone on his knees beside him, and passed over the envoy's emotion by asking with a smile what the Turks thought of the battle of Bender.

"Sire," replied M. Fabrice, "they say that your Majesty killed twenty janissaries with your own hand."

"Ah, these tales are only half true," remarked Karl.

M. Fabrice now informed him that M. Grothusen, M. Görtz, and the principal officers had been ransomed.

"Who by?" asked Karl sharply.

"Ismail Pasha, sire, who paid for M. Grothusen out of his own pocket, the English minister, and that

French nobleman, La Motraye, who came to Bender to see your Majesty."

"And you yourself," said the King keenly. "You have contributed your best."

"Sire, it was my bare duty."

"You shall all be repaid," answered Karl briefly; pecuniary obligations weighed very lightly on him, for he made no account at all of money in which he had no interest, and which he profusely scattered whenever it was in his possession.

Still the obligation to the generous Pasha slightly galled him.

"Is Frederic ransomed?" he asked abruptly.

"Alas, sire, he was slain by the Tartars who captured him, and who quarreled over their victim."

"Ah!" exclaimed Karl, then he added, "I think first he must have slain a dozen of these barbarians with his own hands!"

M. Fabrice was silent a moment, and the King stared down at the floor.

"I have other bad news for your Majesty," said he sadly. "King Stanislaus has been made a prisoner by the Turks and is being brought to Bender."

Karl's hard chest heaved and he raised his head as if to speak.

His eyes shot a fiery glance, but he was silent.

"A messenger came from Moldavia this morning," continued M. Fabrice, "to say that the King was stopped at Jassy. He was traveling as a Swede with a message for your Majesty, but was recognized by the hospodar of Moldavia——"

"Why could he not stay in Pomerania?" demanded Karl sternly.

"Sire, he certainly hoped that his presence might accomplish what his letters have not been able to—and that he might persuade your Majesty to permit him to resign the crown you gave him."

Karl rose impatiently, towering over the envoy, himself a tall man wearing a high peruke.

"No more of that, M. Fabrice," he said. "I will not hear these arguments."

But M. Fabrice insisted, thinking, not unnaturally, that his present misfortunes might soften the inflexible spirit of Karl.

"Sire, the King of Prussia offers a treaty whereby Poland and your Majesty league to keep the Czar in check. This cannot be until Stanislaus resigns his claim, and this he is willing to do—to benefit your Majesty whom he loves," added M. Fabrice simply.

But Karl was not to be moved; not even this powerful alliance against his arch-enemy, not even the prospect of gaining the dearest wish of his life in humbling Peter could shake him for an instant from the course that he considered the just and right, nor into forsaking his friend, even at that friend's request.

He was no politician, and, now that Count Piper was not there to guide him, solved these questions by the simple code of a soldier's honor, a proceeding strange indeed to the councilors of Europe.

"I will never make peace with Augustus, who has broken the peace of Altranstadt like the villain he is, nor with Denmark, who has broken the treaty of Traventhal, nor with Prussia and Hanover, who have vilely bought my lands from the false princes. Times will change—do you think I shall always be like this—and then I will smite them as I smote before. Mark you, M. Fabrice, it was only behind my back they dared to raise their heads—and when I return——"

He made an instinctive movement towards his sword, and finding only the empty straps gave a start, while the color paled in his face.

Instantly recovering himself, he turned to M. Fabrice with a proud smile.

"You know that I am not given to boasting," he said. "And you know that when I return the affairs of Europe will change."

As he spoke these words, the quiet confidence of which was not affected, he was without any resource in the world, not even master of his own person.

His enemies had indeed reared their heads in his absence; Denmark had fallen on his provinces and succeeded in achieving some success despite the Swedish victory of Helsingborg; Augustus was again firmly established on the throne he had vowed to renounce; the Elector of Hanover, now King of England, and for that reason dangerous, had bought some of the territory wrested from Karl in his absence, and was prepared to defend what he held; and Frederic of Prussia would be Sweden's foe if Karl did not consent to the resignation of Stanislaus.

Therefore Karl had practically the whole of Europe either secretly or openly against him, and no friend or ally; both Louis XIV and the Emperor were unfriendly to him, and it had been one of the excuses he had made for not leaving Bender that he could not trust himself in the territories of either of these nations.

The condition of his own country, without her ruler, drained of her best manhood, with commerce ruined, the command of the Baltic lost, and surrounded by enemies, was deplorable.

It seemed as if Count Piper's worst forebodings were to come true, and the exploits of Karl XII would lose all that Karl X had won by the Peace of Brömsebro and the Peace of Roskilde, and Karl XI consolidated by the Battle of Lund.

M. Fabrice, steeped in the politics of Europe, and whose main interest in life was the fortune of the realm over which his young master was one day to rule, looked with amazement at the fortitude of Karl in face of events so untoward and a future so uncertain.

Yet in his own heart he felt a certain spark of hope inspired by the sheer strength of this strange character.

It was Karl who broke the thoughtful silence.

"Go to King Stanislaus, my dear Fabrice," he said quietly, "and tell him never to abandon his claims, for I never shall, nor make any peace with our mutual enemies. And that if I live, all will be different."

"If only your Majesty would return to Stockholm!" exclaimed the envoy.

Karl gave his ugly smile.

"That I shall never do," he replied, "until I can return victorious. But perhaps it is time I went North."

By which M. Fabrice concluded that the King had now resigned all hopes of that Turkish army for which he had waited and Poniatowski intrigued for nearly four years.

The envoy from Holstein-Gottorp wondered where Karl hoped to find the means to carry out these defiance he still hurled at his enemies; the task seemed to him fairly hopeless, and yet, as he stood in the presence of this man, he could not feel disheartened.

"You have no longer any faith in me, M. Fabrice," said Karl, looking with a smile at the envoy's perturbed face.

M. Fabrice did not answer, but with a swelling heart turned away.

The King looked at his bloodstained hands with some disgust and was about to call for water, when Ismail Pasha entered, conducting M. Grothusen.

The Swede gave an exclamation on seeing the state of his master.

"It is a shameful thing to leave his Majesty without a sword!" he exclaimed.

"Allah preserve us," answered Ismail Pasha, "he swore that he would cut off our beards."

With that he retired, leaving the King and his two friends alone.

As if he wished to prevent M. Grothusen from referring to his present plight, Karl began to speak at once of the arrival of King Stanislaus at Bender.

"I must see him," said the King. "I must tell him to return at once to Pomerania and fight there to the utmost."

"Sire," replied M. Grothusen sadly, "King Stanislaus comes under a military escort, and I do not think that anyone will be allowed to approach him."

"But they bring him to Bender!" exclaimed Karl.

M. Grothusen averted his face.

"I do not think that your Majesty will stay at Bender."

At this reminder of his captive position the King, who had not allowed a single impatient word to escape him since he had been made prisoner, colored and made a haughty movement with his head.

"Where do they propose to take me?" he asked haughtily.

"I cannot discover, sire. I think to Adrianople."

Karl glanced at M. Fabrice whose face was still further overcast.

"Well," he remarked, "perhaps we shall yet get our 200,000 men from the Porte. See if you can get a message to King Stanislaus to say that we are still unshaken in our designs."

He was silent a moment, and then added in an impetuous manner, rare for him:

"If they take me to Adrianpole I will punish Mahomet Baltadgi—I will disclose to the Sultan that my letters were intercepted and that Count Fleming was corresponding with the Khan."

That evening the King was taken in a scarlet litter to Adrianople, and King Stanislaus arrived at Bender, having received on the road, by the mouth of M. Fabrice, the message of his inflexible friend.

CHAPTER V

KARL was conducted to Demotica, a little town some leagues from Adrianople; a few of his suite were allowed to be with him and the rest of the Swedes were kept in prison.

Through Poniatowski's able negotiations the Sultan was apprised of the King of Sweden's side of the story, and the Grand Vizier Soliman was dismissed, the Khan and Ismail Pasha banished.

But, despite the efforts of the French ambassador and various secret friends whom Karl had in Constantinople, the Porte showed him no favor, and so far from obtaining the succor of which he had dreamed he was treated as a prisoner, and not allowed even to communicate with Ahmed.

Despite this, Karl, who had by no means so completely relinquished hope of Turkish help as his friends had supposed, refused to return to Sweden, preferring captivity to the humiliation of returning to his realm a defeated and stripped fugitive.

The new vizier having sent for him to be present at a conference with the French ambassador with a view to an alliance against Muscovy, the King, deeply wounded in his pride, sent Müllern, and himself feigned sickness, keeping himself for months enclosed in his chamber, so fearful was he that the Turks might in some way force him to compromise his dignity. He lived now in the simplest style, waited upon by his friends Grothusen, Görtz, and Müllern, for he was without servants, such of these as had survived the Bender fight being in prison, and without any luxuries or even comforts, all his possessions having been burnt at

Varnitza, and the Porte now having ceased the princely generosity that had rendered easy the first years of exile. The news that he received in his confinement was of disaster upon disaster.

Sweden was attacked on all sides.

General Stenbock worthily filled the place of the King in defending his country, and revenged the burning of Stade by reducing Altona to ashes; but he could not long hold the field with such diminished forces against such a powerful combination of enemies, and all the provinces of the Baltic were lost to Sweden as well as most of her possessions in Germany, and Stenbock was losing ground in Breme and Pomerania.

The Saxons, Danes, and Russians joined forces, advanced on Holstein-Gottorp, the little duchy that had been the first cause of this long quarrel; the Swedish army was destroyed, Stenbock made a prisoner, the whole of Pomerania, with the exception of Stralsund, fell into the hands of Russia, the Danes seized Breme, the Russians Finland, and Karl remained at Demotica.

It was believed in Europe that he was dead; the Swedish senate implored his sister to accept the regency; she did so, and wrote to her brother that the councilors wished to make peace with their enemies who on every side overwhelmed them.

Karl sent an imperious and haughty reply, saying he would send one of his boots, if they wished for a master, and that they could take orders from that.

In this extremity the Princess sent Count Liewin to Demotica to argue with Karl.

This nobleman was conducted into the King's presence by Count Poniatowski, who had lately come from Constantinople, where he was convinced he could do nothing more for the Swedish cause.

"You will find his Majesty changed—but not his inflexibility."

To which Count Liewin made answer:

"If he does not return to Sweden, there is not one of us will answer for the crown."

Karl was shut in his chamber, away from the watchful eyes of his Turkish guards that he found so hateful.

As he had now no domestics, Müllern and Grothusen waited on him, and amused his dreary leisure by the reading of French poems and plays and the tales from the sagas.

This life of confinement and idleness, together with the heart-sickness of disappointment and hope deferred, had at last told on Karl's superb constitution as no fatigue or hardship had been able to; the sickness he had so long feigned had now become almost a reality; the glory of his strength had gone.

He had risen from his bed to receive Count Liewin and wore his old blue uniform, black cravat, and top-boots; he was thin and pallid, the blue eyes half-closed, his air languid and apathetic.

His face was beginning to be lined and shadowed; his fair hair was close cropped and receding from the forehead; he was newly shaven and fresh in his person, for he had to the full the Northern fastidiousness as to cleanliness, but his habit was more than ever careless, and there was not as much as a ring on his finger to show his rank.

Count Liewin, looking at him, thought he was different indeed to the gallant youth who had left Stockholm fifteen years before, as indeed Sweden was different to what she had been.

He went on one knee and kissed Karl's passive hand.

"Sire," he said, in a low voice, "all Europe thinks you are dead."

Karl looked at him without answering.

"There is no one who can believe," added Count Liewin, "that Sweden is in such a pass and Karl XII still alive."

These words seemed to move Karl, he colored and dropped his gaze.

"Tell me," he said, "the news from Sweden."

Count Liewin rose and faced the King mournfully.

"Madame Royale, your Majesty's sister, will have told your Majesty of the state of Swedish affairs," he answered.

"She wrote to me as a woman and I replied to her as a King," said Karl. "Tell me now, Count Liewin, as one man to another."

As he spoke he lifted his eyes and gazed at the envoy with his usual coldness.

"Affairs are so bad at home," responded Sweden's envoy, "that the instant return of your Majesty is begged for—nay, demanded."

"Demanded!" cried the King. "Your senate gets out of hand, Count."

He spoke harshly; in his misery he was as jealous of his authority as ever he had been in his grandeur; he refused the senate any right to interfere in affairs save by obeying his orders (forgetting that he was the first king to make a free Sweden enslaved), and he had never forgiven the regency for signing, four years ago, the treaty of neutrality at The Hague.

Count Liewin, though respectful and even humble in demeanor, faced his sovereign boldly.

"Sire, someone must conduct affairs—we have nothing from your Majesty."

Karl ignored this.

"And you would make peace, my sister tells me," he said sternly.

"Sire, we may be forced to take that course," replied the Count.

"If you do," returned Karl, "I shall never ratify it."

"Sire, we are attacked on all sides——"

"Cannot you defend yourselves?"

"Sire, the country is empty of money, men, and all resources."

He wished to add—"drained by your ruinous, useless wars," but checked himself.

Karl glanced towards the window-place where Müllern, Grothusen, and Poniatowski were standing.

"You hear," he said, "how poor-spirited they become at home."

Count Liewin flushed.

"Call us desperate, sire!" he exclaimed.

Müllern and Grothusen were silent, out of pity and respect for the King, but Poniatowski, out of his love, spoke.

"Sire, it would be better that you should return, for there is nothing to be hoped from the Porte."

At these words, coming from the man who had labored so long and faithfully in his cause, who had intrigued for him with such tireless energy, and always so eagerly supported the scheme of obtaining assistance from the Porte, Karl started, and a look of reproach crossed his face.

"Alas!" cried Poniatowski, "in my great loyalty to your Majesty, I must speak the truth—the Swedish cause is lost in Constantinople."

"And in Europe, it would seem," said Karl, with much bitterness, as he rose.

"No," put in Count Liewin quickly, "Sweden only languishes for her King."

"I could not return," said Karl dryly, "in this miserable estate. I have no army."

"Once your Majesty is present to hearten the people an army can be raised."

M. Müllern ventured now to speak.

"And not only your Majesty's army, but your Majesty's councils need your presence."

"So it would seem," replied the King dryly, "since they talk of peace."

"And they will make peace, sire," said Count Liewin boldly, "unless your Majesty returns." Karl, standing now, overtopping all of them, eyed the speaker with a rising anger.

But Count Liewin, who knew that the very existence of his country depended on his firmness, stood his ground.

"Yes," he continued, "if your Majesty does not

return to defend us, we have no resource but to throw ourselves on the mercy of our enemies."

The King turned aside with a swelling heart; these enemies were those who had attacked him fifteen years ago, those whom he had put under his feet so splendidly and gloriously.

He thought now of Count Piper, if, instead of acting according to his code of chivalry and justice, and refusing any advantage to himself from his victories, he had taken the political advantage of his success that his minister had wished him to, if he had refrained from the mad enterprise of endeavoring to dethrone the Czar, if he had never undertaken the reckless expedition into the Ukraine, the results of Narva would not have proved such Dead Sea fruits, nor he and his country be in such peril now.

"If Count Piper had been alive he would have smiled at me now," remarked the King to Grothusen.

"Sire! He has been very loyal to your Majesty."

Karl smiled; he had never been deceived in those about him.

"If Piper had had the power he would have thwarted me in all I did, Grothusen."

He walked up and down the narrow chamber with a languid step, for he was sick in mind and body.

"See how many there are to persuade me against my honor!" he exclaimed.

It galled him beyond words that he must return to his kingdom a fugitive and a beggar when he had been the most renowned name in Europe.

The miseries of Sweden were as nothing in his eyes compared to the affront offered to his pride in this proposed return under present conditions.

"Look you, Count Liewin," he said abruptly, pausing in his walk, "I am without even the money for the journey—Grothusen will tell you how much I am in debt."

"We could raise more money in Constantinople,"

said Grothusen quickly. "For my part I do perceive that this return of yours is imperative, sire."

The King gave his friend a strange look.

"Grothusen, do you recall a little dog I had, named Pompey, that died in Saxony? I thought you loved me well, but now I perceive that no one loved ever as did that beast—he never sought to turn me from my will!"

"Sire!" cried Count Liewin desperately, "does your Majesty mean that you will not return to Sweden?"

"Aye," replied Karl, "we will return, Count, we will return!"

He seated himself wearily, rested his arm on his crossed legs, and shaded his bent face with his hand.

M. Müllern signed to Count Liewin that the audience was ended; he and Poniatowski conducted the envoy from the chamber, leaving the King alone with M. Grothusen.

For a while Karl sat motionless, so uniformly cold and reserved was he, even with his intimates (and those few now with him had become of a necessity very intimate in this close, prison-like life), that this man with him now, his nearest friend, expected no confidence from him, even at this moment. But for once the inflexible pride of Karl gave way to the despair in his heart.

"Oh, Grothusen!" he cried, "how differently I dreamed it all!"

"Sire!" answered Grothusen, profoundly moved, he could say no more; the King was not to be deceived by trite comfort, and his friend knew of no real consolation.

"Peter Alexievitch has all I had—all I want!" continued Karl, in a terrible, broken voice. "The cunning Muscovite! Had I been a well man at Poltava I had broken him as he broke me!"

He rose, clapping his hand down on his sword-hilt, a fury in his blue eyes.

"But as it is, he wins—he has my provinces, my

seas, my commerce, my people as his slaves, my generals as his prisoners—he wins, that drunken savage, Grothusen.”

“He too may meet his Poltava,” said Grothusen fiercely.

The King gave a short laugh, with an effort controlling his rare passion.

“Could we decide it face to face, man to man, I should have no fear of the issue, ruined as I am,” he said, looking down at his sword arm, “for he is very sick, Grothusen, and worn out by many vices. He has a camp follower for his wife, an idiot, rebellious son—after all, I would not be the Czar of Russia.”

Then with an effort to put so bitter a subject from his mind he turned sharply to his friend.

“How much money do we owe?” he asked.

Grothusen named a sum that sounded large even to the King’s prodigality, but he had always been utterly reckless of money, had refused even to glance at accounts, and had encouraged his followers to be the same.

These were all sums of money owing to the French ambassadors to the Porte, Thomas Cook, and other English, and Jews of Constantinople, to M. La Motraye, the French gentleman of Bender, besides to all the members of his suite.

Karl chafed at all this like a lion tickled with straws.

“We must have more money,” he said impatiently. “Pay these usurers cent for cent—get it, somehow. I must send an embassy to the Porte to say farewell. You must go, Grothusen, and with some magnificence. Poniatowski thinks the Sultan might lend money if he will not lend an army.”

“Your Majesty is resolved to return then?” asked the courtier, some hope springing in his heart at the thought of this dreary exile at length coming to an end.

“What else can I do,” returned the King, “when they break my authority in my absence?”

He made no reference to the wretched condition of

his unhappy country and Grothusen knew that he never would; if he cared in the least for Sweden, or regarded her merely as the arsenal from which to take his weapons of war, it was impossible to tell, but he always showed an unconcern amounting to indifference to all that concerned the true welfare of his subjects.

"Grothusen," he said suddenly, "the son of Aurora von Königsmarck was at the battle of Stade, was he not?"

"Yes, sire," replied Grothusen, wondering at this change of subject, "a brilliant lad, they say."

"His mother defied me once," remarked Karl, with his ugly smile. "She was a surprising woman—what happened to her?"

"I do not know, sire—she left the Elector years ago."

"If she is alive," said Karl grimly, "she will be pleased to hear of my present state."

Grothusen looked startled and bewildered, but the King said no more; he was thinking, irrelevantly, of John Rheinhold Patkul.

The execution of this man, his one barbarity, was the sole fruit of his victories—the only thing that he had achieved and that no one could take away from him; the might of the Czar and all his allies could not put together the broken bones of Patkul.

Karl moved abruptly, checking his line of thought.

"Well," he said, "let us make our preparations to return home."

CHAPTER VI

A FREEZING night in November, a cutting wind sweeping up from the Baltic, a sky so black with heavy clouds that not a star gleamed through, and the sentries on the walls of Stralsund shivered at their posts.

It was the only city in Pomerania still held for Karl; everything was ready for defense in case of an attack, and the eyes and ears of the sentinels were strained against the darkness of the night.

They knew not when they might be surrounded by the armies of the Czar.

A clatter of hoofs out of the obscurity of the night and the sentinels at the gates stood at attention.

It was one o'clock in the morning and the whole town slept.

"Who goes there?" challenged the sentry, as the horsemen drew up at the gate.

There were but two of them, as shown by the lantern beams above the arched entrance.

The foremost answered.

"We are couriers dispatched from Turkey by the King of Sweden," he said.

The soldier looked at him curiously and saw a tall, powerful-looking man in a gray suit and dark blue mantle, wearing a black peruke and a riding-hat laced with gold.

"Sir, it is a long while since we have heard of the King of Sweden at Stralsund," remarked the sentry, not moving from his post.

"Call out the guard," said the stranger imperiously. "I must pass."

His companion, a slight, fair young man, wrapped in a heavy furred mantle, now spoke.

"Fellow, do not keep us here parleying this bitter night—we have ridden from Hungary to Mecklenburg, and it is sixteen days since we saw a bed."

The guard had now turned out into the narrow gate space, and the officer asked the strangers their business.

"Sir," said the first speaker, "we bring dispatches from the King of Sweden."

"The Governor is in bed," said the officer, "you must wait till daybreak."

"Sir," cried the traveler, with a flash of terrible blue eyes from the shadow of his laced hat, "if you do not go at once and wake General Dücker you will all be punished to-morrow."

The officer admitted them into the town at this, but was still inclined to refuse to wake the Governor.

"My God!" murmured the fair young man. "Is this journey to have no end?"

His companion turned sternly to the soldiers.

"Dismount my friend," he said. "He is exceedingly fatigued."

Two of the men ran forward to the horse's head. As they grasped the bridle the rider sank fainting from the saddle.

"Poor During!" exclaimed his companion. "He is not used to these hardships."

He looked with some tenderness at the slack figure of the young man as the soldiers carried him to the guard-room, and bade them treat him with all care and respect.

In the meanwhile a sergeant had been sent to awaken the Governor, who, thinking it must be some person of importance or some imperative message, bade the stranger to his presence.

General Dücker's house was near the gates, and it was only a short time after his appearance at the city walls that the messenger from Demotica was admitted to the bed-chamber of the Governor.

That gentleman, startled by this sudden rousing from his sleep, stood in a dressing-gown by the side of his bed; a valet was lighting the candles that stood on mantleshelf and bureau.

The stranger entered, making the room look small. He brought with him the cold outer air; wet, dirty snow was on his boots that were flecked with mud to the knees; he flung back his heavy blue mantle and showed his gray coat, laced with gold which was like that of a German officer.

"You are from Turkey, sire?" asked the General, speaking with some sternness as he observed the visitor did not remove his braided hat.

"Yes," replied the other, "we have traveled all through Germany, from Moravia to Westphalia—good riding in sixteen days."

He took off his hat as he spoke, and flung himself into the first chair he came to with a careless ease very displeasing to the Governor of Stralsund.

"You came a long way round," he remarked.

"The journey, sir, could have been made shorter by half."

The stranger looked full at the speaker; his face looked pale between the full curls of the black peruke; his blue eyes, that were of an unusual size and brilliancy, held a curious expression.

"Is it possible," he said, "that my most loyal subjects have forgotten me?"

"By Heaven," cried General Dücker, in a loud voice, "it is the King!"

He threw himself on his knees and kissed Karl's hand.

"It is the King come back!"

"And not too soon, General Dücker," smiled Karl. "Come, I will sleep a little."

But the old soldier was sobbing with joy, the valet had run from the room with the great news, and the house was lit from cellar to garret in an instant, and full of the officers of the garrison.

"But like this! Your Majesty returns alone?"

"There was neither money nor men to be had from the Porte," said Karl dryly. "My escort I left at Pitesti on the Turkish frontier. I had no wish to go through Germany like a traveling show, satisfying the curiosity of the vulgar. I took Colonel During with me, and we made a detour, traveling with post-horses. We were not known anywhere. I have not taken my clothes off since we started," he added. "We rode day and night. I fear I have nearly killed During."

He smiled and rose.

"So I am on Swedish soil again—and this is the sole town I hold in Pomerania. There is much for me to do, General Dücker."

The town was now full of people and illuminated from end to end; candles and lamps appeared in all the windows, barrels of wine were rolled into the streets, and the King's health drunk amid fierce excitement.

The soldiers pressed round the house of the Governor hoping for a glimpse of the King who had returned to restore Sweden's fortunes.

A chamber was hastily prepared for the King; he had no clothes save those he wore, and his boots that he had worn for sixteen days had to be cut from his legs, so swollen were they with excessive riding.

He tossed off the dark peruke that had served as a disguise, looking different with his clipped fair hair and more like the King these men remembered fifteen years ago.

"To-morrow I will inspect the fortifications, General Dücker," he said, as he stretched his great length on the bed.

He bid them open the shutters that the light of the illuminations might fall across the room, and the sound of his people's acclamations come to his ears.

He was soon in a deep slumber of absolute exhaustion; his hand, even in his sleep, stretched towards his sword that lay by his side.

In this wild way did the wild King come home.

PART IV

FREDRIKSSTEN

"Voilà la pièce finie, allons souper."—Mégret at Fredrikssten.

THE King of Sweden was in his camp before Fredrikssten, the fortress that protected Fredrikshald, the town that was considered the Key of Norway.

This was the second expedition against Norway that the King had undertaken since his return from Turkey, both in the dead of winter, to the astonishment of Europe; it seemed that it would have been more reasonable for him to remain and defend his bankrupt kingdom menaced on all sides, in a state of siege and reduced to using leather money; but Karl never did the reasonable thing nor what other men expected of him.

None of his ancient success had attended him in his fresh campaigns against his enemies; Stralsund, after a long siege and desperate battles in which the King fought hand-to-hand with his foes, had been taken by assault, and Karl had escaped across the half-frozen Baltic to Karlskrona, leaving among the dead in the burning town Grothusen, During, and Dahldorf, three faithful friends of his exile.

His enemies now included the King of Prussia, who had bought Stettin and a part of Pomerania from the

King of Denmark, and the Czar and the King of England who had purchased the rest of Sweden's spoils, Breme and Verden, from the astute Frederic, who was not slow to turn his conquests into ready cash.

Peter retained his own booty; this consisted of Riga, Livonia, Ingria, Carelia, Vasa, Finland, the Isles in the Baltic, some of which were not twelve leagues from Stockholm.

By his victory of Aland he had demolished the Swedish fleet, and led captive to his new fort of Kronstadt the flagship of Ehrensköld, the Swedish Admiral.

But more bitter to the peculiar temperament of Karl than these successes of his great rival, was the ruin of Holstein-Gottorp, which he had taken under his protection since the beginning of the war, and the reinstatement of Augustus in Poland, with the consent of all the guarantees of the treaty of Altranstadt.

He forbade Stanislaus to conclude the advantageous treaty the good-natured Elector offered, and give the Pole, who had thus to forfeit his ancient estates and position, for the empty title of King, the Duchy of Deux-Ponts which was in his gift. To replace Stanislaus on the Polish throne, and to rescue the estates of his nephew whom he also intended to make his heir, was now the chief end of the King's policy.

Of the state of his people he cared little; he had put on enormous taxes, debased the coinage, called up all the fit men, strained every resource to continue his ruinous wars; during two winter campaigns he had watched his soldiers die of cold among the snows of Norway, with the same insensibility as he had seen them die amid the ice of the Ukraine.

Baron Görtz, the only one of his ancient friends left to him, was now his Prime Minister, and pursued a fantastic foreign policy, but too attractive to the strange spirit of the King.

The Swede by means of deep and complicated intrigues, and with the help of Cardinal Albuoni, Primate

of Spain, sought to put the Stuart Pretender on the throne of England, in place of that Elector of Hanover who had outraged Karl by his bargain with Denmark.

These dangerous intrigues had been discovered in England and the Swedish ambassador arrested, but Baron Görtz still persisted in his scheme, and Karl continued to support him; his design was now to draw Peter into a secret alliance with Karl, that should place Europe at the feet of Russia and Sweden.

The Czar, ever eager for material advantage, and indifferent to mere glory, was disposed to listen to a plan that would silence his most obstinate foe, and Karl, no politician, and interested in nothing but war, was ready to forego, at least for the moment, his design to dethrone Peter, if he could secure vengeance against those foes whom he despised and hated more than he did Peter—the Kings of Poland, Denmark, and England.

To besiege Norway in winter, and wrest this prize from the Danes, was more pleasing to his character than to attack in Germany, or to remain on the defensive at home; and Baron Görtz had assured him that Peter would not attack in his absence.

The Czar indeed was gluttoned with conquest, and was always wise enough to not undertake more than he could with safety perform.

Karl had with him the Prince of Hesse-Cassel, who had lately married his sister; this professional soldier had lately been serving the States-General, and was regarded by the King as a good general, but he gave him little confidence and no affection.

This Prince was with the King when the Swedish camp was being laid down before the heights of Fredrikssten, and Karl, in high spirits at the thought of the approaching struggle, spoke with him in a more friendly spirit than was his wont.

"Ah, Prince," he said, "when we have taken Fredrikshald, Norway will be ours."

"How long does your Majesty think to take in subduing Norway?" asked the German courteously.

"I should have taken it last year," replied the King, "but for the provisions."

He had made the same mistake he had made in the Ukraine—that of moving his army too far from his base, and had had to return to Sweden with starving troops.

"Six months," he added; "then, at last, I shall see Stockholm again—a pity Count Piper is not here to hear me say that," he smiled.

It was eighteen years since he had seen his capital, to which he did not intend to return till he was triumphant.

"Let us go and look at the trenches—these engineers are very slow," continued Karl; he called an officer and bade him fetch M. Mégret, the French engineer who was conducting the siege.

It was a bitter night but cloudless; there was no moon; the stars glimmered hard and clear as if cut from crystal in the dark sky.

Everyone but the King was muffled in mantles and furs; Karl wore his plain uniform with black cravat and top-boots.

He had now completely recovered from his sickness—the sickness engendered by a soft life—and was at the height of his great strength and perfect hardihood; he had filled out to the proportions of a Viking, could live on bread and water, go without food for days, sleep on the ground in midwinter with no covering but his cloak, and no pillow save one of straw.

It was this strength of body, this fortitude of soul, this stern, austere life, that made him so respected and feared, that neither in court nor camp did anyone dare to murmur at the misfortunes he had brought on Sweden.

M. Hesse-Cassel took his leave to return to his own quarters, and Karl awaited the coming of M. Mégret.

He was impatient to take Fredrikssten and to proceed into Norway, and he thought that the works were not as advanced as they should be.

He walked up and down the little tent, his step ringing on the frozen ground, his breath clear before him in the frosty air.

As M. Mégret entered he raised his head; the Frenchman looked at him and thought, "If the Czar could see you now he would not be too secure," so redoubtable did Karl appear with his magnificent make, his noble inflexible face, his cold air of power.

"M. Mégret," he said, "I should like to see your works."

The engineer bowed and followed the King out of the tent. —

The soldiers were desperately laboring in the starlight.

"They work slowly, sire, because the ground is so frozen and rocky," remarked M. Mégret, "but the place will be taken in eight days."

"We shall see," replied Karl.

He entered the trenches accompanied by his aide-de-camp Siquier and the engineer; they had no lights, but now and then there was a dull glow from a bomb cast by the enemy; mingled in the sound of the cannon was the rattle of pick and spade on the hard ground.

The King continually complained as he advanced from trench to trench of the backwardness of the work.

"You would make me take as long to gain Fredrikssten," he said, "as I mean to use for the whole of Norway."

So splendid was his quiet presence that these words did not sound boastful from the lips of a king of broken fortunes; looking at him the officers forgot the lost provinces, the brass money, the starving populace, and remembered only Narva and Klissow.

The King continued to move rapidly from one por-

tion of the works to another; he was now joined by the captains of the trenches.

An intermittent firing came from the fortress, the red light of the cannon showing now and then in the cold night.

Occasionally there was the whistle of a musket-ball as the Norwegian sentries fired at the Swedes working in the dark.

The King reached an angle of a *boyau* in the finished portion of the entrenchment; he paused, wishing to observe how far the parallel was advanced, and mounting the fire-step rested his elbows on the parapet and watched his soldiers moving, crouching, running, digging among the dislodged fragments of rock and the heaps of frozen earth; here and there the starlight showed dully a patch of snow; the noise of the hurried labor was continuous; despite the random cannonade from Fredrikssten the Swedes were carrying their works up to the very *glacis* of the fort, and they occupied the entire *terre-plein*. Above the northern sky showed clear as water agleam with cold stars that palpitated in the pale colorless night; a bitter wind swept these frozen heights, and nature's stillness reigned above the horrid sounds of war.

Karl looked across the bent figures of his soldiers to the great fort on the summit of the rocks. M. Siquier who was close behind him called out to him not to expose himself, for his head and shoulders showed above the earthworks which were directly opposite to one of the cannon on the advanced fortification of Fredrikssten; the Norwegians could be observed moving round this battery. Karl looked over his shoulder and smiled; without speaking he returned to his observation; his silence conveyed extraordinary arrogance, vitality, and power.

Suddenly he put his hand to his sword and gave a great sigh.

"Sire!" cried M. Siquier.

Karl remained motionless, standing like a sentinel with

his sword half drawn from the scabbard, facing the dark heights.

As the aide-de-camp mounted beside him he fell forward on the frozen earth, his haughty head suddenly bowed face downwards on the parapet. A stray musket-ball had entered his left temple; when M. Siquier touched him he was already dead.

THE END.

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